BOOK 5
The Unicorn Chronicles

# The INVASION of LUSTER

Bruce Coville

THE UNICORN CHRONICLES: BOOK V

# THE INVASION OF LUSTER

*Also by Bruce Coville*

THE THIEF OF WORLDS
JEREMY THATCHER, DRAGON HATCHER
JENNIFER MURDLEY'S TOAD
GOBLINS IN THE CASTLE
ALIENS ATE MY HOMEWORK
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**Other Books in the Unicorn Chronicles**

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Book 2: Song of the Wanderer
Book 3: Enter the Whisperer
Book 4: Secret of the Delvers

THE UNICORN CHRONICLES: BOOK V

# THE INVASION OF LUSTER

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THE INVASION OF LUSTER

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*For*
*Adam and Charlotte*
*Extenders of the Family Tree*

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# CAST OF CHARACTERS

Following is a list of characters introduced in previous volumes of the Unicorn Chronicles. Characters who appear for the first time in this book are not included.

## HUMANS

**Cara Diana Hunter:** Cara leaped into the world of the unicorns by using an amulet given to her by her grandmother, Ivy Morris.

**Beloved:** The ancient and eternal enemy of the unicorns, Beloved seeks their destruction because of a horrible clash between her father and the unicorn Whiteling. Their struggle-to-the-death left the tip of Whiteling's horn lodged in Beloved's heart, where it both constantly wounds and constantly heals her. The horn has kept her alive for hundreds of years, but also keeps her in never-ending pain.

**Ian Hunter:** Cara's father, who had worked for Beloved in the hope of finding Cara after she was taken by her grandmother. He later turned against Beloved and is seeking a way to rescue Cara's mother from the Rainbow Prison. Ian occasionally loses his sight due to a desperate bargain he made to help him find that prison.

**Fallon:** A mysterious man — tall, muscular, with brown skin and long blonde hair — who accompanied Ian on his quest to enter the Rainbow Prison. Fallon is on a quest for his heart-brother, Elihu, who he believes may be found in Luster.

**Rajiv:** A street boy from Delhi, who has also joined Ian's quest.

**M'Gama (also known as “The Geomancer”):** A tall, elegant woman of African descent, her magic is worked through earth and stone. She is a trusted advisor to the Queen.

**Grimwold:** An elderly dwarf who is the official Chronicle Keeper for Luster. He is responsible for recording new adventures and events after they happen.

**Alma Leonetti:** As a girl, she found her way to Luster to ask the old Queen, Arabella Skydancer, to bring the unicorns back to Earth. For her help over the years she was granted the chance to drink from the Queen's pool. As a result, she has aged very slowly. Though now quite elderly, she continues to advise the new Queen, Amalia Flickerfoot.

**Thomas the Tinker:** A kindly man, and one of the most widely traveled humans in Luster. He can mend almost anything.

**Kenneth:** One of Beloved's most trusted and faithful Hunters. He views Ian as a traitor to the cause of destroying the unicorns.

**Felicity:** A strange, exasperating woman that Ian met in the Rainbow Prison. She helped him locate Martha, but teased him unmercifully before she would do so.

## UNICORNS

**Lightfoot:** A rebellious unicorn prince who is next in line for the throne. He finds this idea ridiculous, and is considered a bit of a disgrace to the royal family. He was the first unicorn Cara met after entering Luster, and they have a strong friendship.

**Amalia Flickerfoot:** The Queen of the Unicorns; as a youth she was a restless wanderer much attracted to the human world. Hoping to keep Amalia safe should she be in danger of capture by Hunters, the Geomancer created a magic that would allow Amalia to become human. Using the magic caused her to lose her memory of her life as a unicorn, and for decades she wandered in human form as Ivy Morris. She was finally restored to her true form when the previous Queen, Arabella Skydancer, departed this life.

**Moonheart:** Amalia's brother and Lightfoot's uncle; he is a bit gruff and does not much approve of Lightfoot.

**Belle:** One of the more fierce unicorns of Luster.

## DELVERS

**Gnurflax:** The king of the delvers; perpetually angry, he truly hates the unicorns.

**Rocky (Nedzik):** A young delver who fears that Gnurflax has gone mad and is leading the delvers into great danger. The King declared him a traitor and stripped him of his name, one of the worst punishments that can be meted out to a delver. Cara gave him his nickname to try to help make up for this.

**Namza:** The king's wizard, who is concerned by the influence the Whisperer has had on Gnurflax. Attempting to eavesdrop on the King and the Whisperer, he slipped into Stone while trying to avoid detection, and is now trapped there.

## CENTAURS

**Arianna:** Granddaughter of the Chiron (leader of the centaurs), who tended him until the time of his death. She loves Arkon.

**Arkon:** A noble centaur who longs to become the new the Chiron, now that the old Chiron is dead.

## OTHER CREATURES

**The Squijum:** A small, chittery, fast-moving creature who appears a bit like a cross between a squirrel and a monkey. He travels with Cara, and is mostly adorable, but also frequently annoying.

**The Dimblethum:** A large, slow moving creature who looks something like a bear who began to turn into a man but stopped halfway through the process. He is powerful and gruff, and not friendly with any unicorns save Lightfoot. He was the first to find Cara when she fell into Luster and is very protective of her.

**Medafil:** A brave but slightly nervous griffin with a strange speech pattern. He is a loyal friend to Cara — as he was to her grandmother in the days when she was known as the Wanderer.

**The Whisperer:** A mysterious, unseen being formed when the unicorns attempted a mass ceremony to purge themselves of all that was less than perfect. He is the coalesced form of all the darkness that was drawn out of them, a tempter, a seducer, a master of creating trouble and conflict.

# BLOOD MOON NIGHT

The onrush of a conquering force is like the bursting of pent-up waters into a chasm a thousand fathoms deep.

— Sun Tzu, The Art of War

# 1

# Blood Moon Rising

***Luster: Autumngrove***

Cara Diana Hunter edged closer to her grandmother, Amalia Flickerfoot, Queen of the unicorns. Neither the girl nor the Queen were able to keep their eyes from the sky, where the scarlet circle of the Blood Moon rose higher and higher.

Not far to Cara's right stood her friend Medafil, who had flown her back to Autumngrove after their journey to the Valley of the Centaurs. Medafil was a gryphon, with a head and wings like those of an eagle, though vastly larger, and a lower body like that of a great, tawny lion. Right now his sharp, curved beak was opening and closing — a sign, Cara knew, that he was muttering to himself, something he did when he was nervous. Additionally, his tufted ears, the only part of his head not like that of an eagle, were twitching. So was his long, lean tail, which — save for the burst of fur at its tip — looked almost like a serpent in the moonlight.

Around the gryphon, the girl, and the Queen stood the Queen's Council, a group of her closest advisors, mostly unicorns save for the elderly human Alma Leonetti. All knew the dreadful fact that their enemy, Beloved, had gained one of the Queen’s Five, the powerful amulets that allowed passage back and forth between Earth and Luster. Normally the amulets would carry only one or two people — or unicorns — between the two worlds. But there was now little doubt that Beloved intended to use the stolen amulet to create a gate through which she could bring an entire army of Hunters, with the hope of exterminating the unicorns completely.

And now another rumor was circulating, one that said the delvers had stolen a powerful item from M’Gama, the Geomancer — an item that would allow Beloved to choose the exact location at which to launch her invasion.

Where that spot would be no one knew, for it was unclear what, if anything, Beloved had learned of Luster. The Queen had asked M’Gama to use her magic to determine the most likely spot for the invasion. The Geomancer had agreed, but then had fallen mysteriously silent — a silence that only added to the Queen’s worries, since M’Gama was one of their closest and most powerful allies.

Before she fell out of contact, M’Gama had given the Queen one useful piece of information, telling her *when* the attack would most likely occur: this very night, which was

the night of the Blood Moon, the anniversary of the death battle between Whiteling and Beloved's father.

Now watching the sky, watching in horror as the crimson orb of the Blood Moon rose slowly above them, Cara felt a fresh shiver of terror. Her fear was not simply for the unicorns, but for Luster itself. She had come to love this world intensely. The thought of it being invaded made her sick.

Amplifying her fear was the fact that Cara knew Beloved was seeking her, personally . . . though for what reason she had no idea.

The girl moved closer to her grandmother. She was about to lean against her, when the Queen cried out in pain.

"What is it?" asked Moonheart, who was standing nearby. "What has happened, sister?"

Amalia Flickerfoot shook her head, causing her mane to ripple like silk and silver over her neck. "I don't know, brother. I felt as if something had struck me a blow. I felt __"

Before she could say more, the ground rippled beneath them.

The unicorns around them trumpeted in panic, rearing on their hind legs and pawing at the air. From beyond the council grove Cara could hear the same kind of panic spreading among the hundreds of other unicorns that were gathered at Autumngrove.

That no such thing as an earthquake had ever troubled Luster's surface made the trembling of the stones beneath their hooves all the more terrifying.

"Do not fear!" bugled the Queen. *"Do not fear!"*

Her voice was lost in the chaos. But the tremor only lasted a moment, and as the world settled the worst of the panic ebbed away.

"Do not fear!" called Amalia again. "Remember, this happened from time to time on the old world. It is called an earthquake."

"But it has never happened in Luster!" said Moonheart. "What does it mean?"

Amalia Flickerfoot gazed at her brother, clearly uneasy, before finally answering, "I believe it means that Beloved has opened her gate into Luster." She paused, then said, almost to herself, "But a new gate should not cause this kind of disruption. What has she done to our world?"

Though she tried to mask it, the fear in her voice was so palpable it made Cara shudder.

# 2

# The Breached Tree

***Luster: The Axis Mundi***

Even as Cara and her grandmother were watching the rising of the moon, far away Prince Lightfoot stood trembling in astonishment at what he had just seen in that same bloodred light.

Not twenty feet ahead of him loomed the Axis Mundi. The very center of Luster, it was a tree so vast that it filled the unicorn prince's field of vision.

Between Lightfoot and the tree stood a cairn whose stones rose well above the Prince's shoulder. On that cairn had rested a ball of wire, which his friend the Dimblethum had placed there but moments before. As soon as Lightfoot had seen the thing, he knew what it was: the "anchor" that would let Beloved choose the spot where she would enter Luster.

The explosion that followed the Dimblethum's placing of the wire sphere had knocked the Prince to the ground, momentarily blinding him. When his eyes cleared and he

managed to stagger back to his feet he had realized two things, both of which frightened him. First, the Dimblethum had disappeared. Second, the wires of that sphere were glowing a fiery orange.

Lightfoot had flung himself toward the cairn, hoping to knock it down and trample the glowing ball. But despite three attempts, some magical barrier had prevented him from reaching it.

Then, as he had watched in horror, the wire sphere — untouched — lifted from the cairn. When it was hovering about a foot above the stones, it began to spin, spitting off flecks of red and yellow light. They fell, still glowing, onto the silvery-blue leaves that covered the forest floor. For a moment Lightfoot had feared they would spark a fire. When he saw that was not going to happen, he had returned his attention to the spinning sphere.

Slowly, silently, it had drifted toward the great tree. His heart pounding, Lightfoot had strained with all his might against the magical barrier that held him back.

It had not budged by so much as an inch.

When the glowing sphere struck the trunk of the tree, the Prince had averted his eyes. Another blast of power and energy had rolled past him, its force knocking him to the ground once more — ground that was now shaking beneath him.

Twisting toward the tree, Lightfoot had cried out in dismay. A ragged hole had appeared in the trunk. Starting at ground level, the hole stretched to twice the Prince's height and was wide enough for five men to walk abreast.

From the darkness overhead, Lightfoot heard a keening, as if the branches themselves were calling out the tree's pain.

Within the opening that had pierced the tree shimmered a curtain of mist. Past that thin veil Lightfoot could see, dimly, another world, a world bounded by stone walls. It took the Prince a moment to realize he was glimpsing the kind of castle he had heard sung of in the old stories the unicorns had brought with them when they departed Earth for Luster.

But it was not the castle that transfixed Lightfoot with fear. What wrenched his heart now was what he saw approaching from beyond that veil of mist: row after row after row of grim-faced, angry-eyed men.

The Prince shuddered. These were not just "men."

They were, quite clearly, *Hunters.*

Even worse, in front of the Hunters strode another human, one Lightfoot knew all too well from his last encounter with her: Beloved, the ancient and eternal enemy of the unicorns.

A quiver trembled along the Prince's flanks as Beloved drew close to that shimmer of mist. Her dark eyes blazed

and her silver hair moved freely about her, as if somehow lifted and attended by its own private breezes.

Lightfoot scrambled to his feet. His first instinct was to turn and flee across the meadow that surrounded the tree. But that would surely attract the attention of the invaders. And it would do the unicorns no good. The more useful tactic, though also far more dangerous, would be to spy on the men.

With that in mind, and thankful for the darkness, the Prince moved quickly around the tree, which was so huge it could easily hide him.

Unable to see, but listening with keen ears, he heard the astonished shouts of the arriving men. It was obvious that whatever they had been expecting, whatever they had been told, they were still amazed to find themselves in another world.

To his own shock, Lightfoot felt a sudden urge to move back around the tree *toward* the men. The compulsion was so powerful it was almost impossible to resist. What in the world was going on? He was baffled, until, peering around the curve of the trunk, he spotted the reason: Arriving with the Hunters was a group of young women.

Lightfoot shuddered again. From the time of the slaying of Whiteling, unicorns had been driven by an overwhelming need to come to the aid of maidens in the wood. With new horror, the Prince realized the reason Beloved was bringing

these young women to Luster: They were *bait* — lures intended to draw unsuspecting unicorns to their deaths.

Sudden anger overwhelmed his fear. He wanted to charge among the Hunters, trumpeting his rage, slashing with his hooves, stabbing with his horn, wounding and killing as many as he could before their swords and spears brought him down. He shook his head as he realized that this would not be wise. The Queen must know of this, and he was the only one who could tell her. Therefore, he must not fall, must not be captured. With that thought, any remaining fear he might have felt for his own safety vanished, replaced by a greater fear for the fate of his kind. For centuries Beloved had wanted to wipe out the unicorns. Was it possible that now, at last, she was going to succeed?

Lightfoot edged back around the tree, hoping he could determine how many Hunters were entering Luster. But even peering around the curve of the great trunk did him no good. Unicorns do not have much use for numbers, and he had never learned to think in terms of the many, many men he saw streaming forth. Were there more of them than there were unicorns in Luster? For that matter, how many unicorns *did* live in Luster? *Why had he never paid attention to such things?*

The men kept coming, the rearmost omes hauling large carts, which the Prince guessed must be filled with supplies. Soon the men nearly filled the area in front of the

tree, spilling well past the spot where the magical barrier had prevented Lightfoot from knocking down the cairn. He wondered if that meant the barrier was down now or if it only blocked passage in one direction.

*Stop!* he told himself fiercely. *Think about that later. My main task now is to not be seen, not be captured. And that means . . . that means . . .* Lightfoot found himself losing his focus as he was suddenly overcome by the powerful attraction of the maidens walking with the Hunters. *How strange. Even though I know why they are here, my heart is still drawn to them. I wonder if they understand the treachery expected of them — understand what will die if they are successful.*

With considerable effort he forced himself to ignore the maidens and returned his attention to the procession of Hunters.

Suddenly the men stopped. Lightfoot realized it was because Beloved herself had stopped. Turning to face the men and maidens gathered around her, she raised her arms and cried, “Attend me now, my children!”

Her voice was clear, strong, and compelling — even for Lightfoot, who both hated and feared her.

She began to rant. The Prince could make out some of what she said. His father, Dancing Heart, had always claimed that Lightfoot’s greatest gift was for language. That was why he could talk to such strange things as the

delvers and the Dimblethum. And his connection with Cara had let him pick up numerous human words and phrases. So even though most of what Beloved now said was lost to him, he could tell, quite clearly, that she was urging the men to go out and kill as many unicorns as they could, as quickly as they could. He caught the words “blood” and “evil” fairly frequently and began to feel frustrated that he could not understand all she said. Yet even without knowing each of her words, the hate in Beloved’s voice made him feel unclean. He wanted to find some clear stream where he could wash himself free of the filth of her rage.

Then the enemy said something that he *did* understand and it filled him with new fear. “Above all, I want the girl — Cara Diana Hunter. Bring her to me!”

With that, Beloved seemed to be finished. Dropping her arms, she murmured, “It’s autumn here. A good time for death.” With a shiver, she rubbed her arms and said something about a cloak.

One of the Hunters stepped forward. He seemed to be offering to do something for her. Without waiting for an answer, he started for the tunnel in the tree.

Beloved uttered a sharp command that stopped him in his tracks.

Lightfoot strained to understand, trying to untangle the meaning of Beloved’s words. As near as he could make out,

it would be dangerous for the man to go back through the tree so soon — something about opposing magics that would fight each other. According to Beloved, he must wait a certain number of hours before he could return to Earth.

Lightfoot knew from Cara that hours were a measure of time. But he had no clear sense of how long an hour actually was. And he didn't understand the number that Beloved had used.

The Hunter, looking embarrassed, nodded and backed away from the tree. At the same time, Beloved clutched her chest, then shrieked. "Go! *Go!"* This was followed by more words the Prince didn't understand, followed by final words that were all too clear: "Go and kill unicorns! Kill them! *Kill them all!"*

The Hunters erupted in a mighty cheer. Then, without uttering another sound, most of them broke into groups of three and four. The maidens, who had been standing in a cluster, split up, each joining one of the groups. Lightfoot noted that there were not enough maidens to go around, so that many groups were maidenless.

*"Go!"* cried Beloved again.

Lightfoot stiffened and held himself as still as possible, desperately hoping none of the Hunters would come near him. One group did pass close to his right side — too close for comfort, but, to his relief, not close enough to spot him.

Within moments, Hunters and maidens had faded into the forest, leaving Beloved alone.

At least, Lightfoot thought the enemy was alone. So he was surprised when Beloved turned to her right and, as if answering a question, said, “Yes, it is indeed as you promised.”

*Is she talking to someone else*? Lightfoot wondered. He moved closer, then pointed his ears forward, straining to hear.

The hint of a whisper came to him, too faint to make out the words.

Smiling, Beloved said, “I will not forget what I owe you.”

So intent was Lightfoot on trying to hear the voice that responded to Beloved that he neglected to pay attention to closer sounds — such as the lightest of footfalls approaching from his right. It was only when a spear grazed his side that the Prince realized what danger he had been ignoring. He spun and bugled a challenge. Two men sprinted toward him, swords drawn, faces twisted with bloodlust. The second man, who still held his spear, raised it and threw. It hurtled through the air to lodge itself in Lightfoot’s shoulder. The Prince bugled again, this time in pain.

The men were almost on him. In that instant, Lightfoot knew what he must do. Turning from the Hunters, ignoring the searing pain in his shoulder, hoping the barrier truly

was down now, he galloped toward Beloved. If he could move fast enough, fiercely enough, perhaps he could trample her beneath his hooves.

Beloved saw him coming and exulted. “First blood!” she cried, her voice filled with an unholy joy.

The spear embedded in Lightfoot’s shoulder sagged, then snagged on a root. The impact ripped it free, tearing open a wound that sent scarlet-silver blood flowing down his chest and a lightning bolt of pain shooting into his leg.

As the Prince staggered, Beloved drew a dagger from beneath her robe. Its blade flashed red in the Blood Moon’s light.

Lightfoot reared, intending to send a rain of silver hoofblows onto her head. But he had underestimated his enemy. With an ugly cry of joy, she flung the blade. It penetrated his chest between his forelegs, causing him to stagger again.

Reaching into her robe, Beloved pulled out another dagger.

Raw terror seized Lightfoot. He knew, with every fiber of his being, that he did not want to die on a blade wielded by this madwoman. In that same moment, he saw the answer, shimmering beyond her: the gate to Earth!

Gathering what was left of his strength, Lightfoot hurtled forward, racing past Beloved.

“Stop him!” she shrieked. *“Stop him!”*

The Prince was almost at the opening now. Ignoring the fiery pains in his chest and side, he jumped into the wounded tree and galloped along the wooden tunnel. With a leap that took most of his remaining strength, he soared through the shimmer of light. As he did, a strange tingle ran the length of his body, causing him to gasp.

He continued forward, carried by his own momentum, and seconds later found himself in the very last place he — or any unicorn — would have ever thought to seek for shelter: the courtyard of Beloved's castle.

A shout of rage from behind made Lightfoot realize he was not safe yet. One of the men had leaped through the tree in pursuit.

"Die, unicorn!" roared the Hunter, his words far too easy for the Prince to understand. "Die in the name of Beloved!" The man raced forward, his blade pointed straight at Lightfoot's heart.

Though the Prince was eager to do battle, his wounds were too much, and he found that the last of his strength was gone. Lacking the energy to fight, or even to run, he braced himself for the end.

The Hunter raised his sword to strike. But as the blade began its downward arc, the man's face twisted in pain and terror. He cried out, an uncomprehending shout that echoed eerily from the castle walls. His sword clattered to

the cobblestones when he dropped it so that he could beat at his skin.

The desperate action had no effect.

Watching in horror, Lightfoot saw the man's flesh start to bubble.

The Hunter fell to the ground, writhing as he screamed in agony.

A moment later, he was dead.

Staring at the twisted, blackened corpse, Lightfoot remembered Beloved's warning to the other Hunter about opposing magics. Then his own wounds overcame him. His knees buckled, and he collapsed onto the cobblestones.

*At least they're only wounds*, he thought, *not two kinds of magic warring within my flesh, eating me alive.*

He was still trying to remember exactly why that was important when everything went black.

The unicorn prince lay unconscious in the courtyard of his greatest enemy.

# 3

# The Ruby Fails

***The Rainbow Prison***

In the red shaft of the Rainbow Prison, Ian Hunter knelt in front of an ancient tree, holding a dying street urchin in his arms.

That boy, Rajiv by name, had just reached out his hand to touch the cheek of Ian's wife, whose ghostly form, insubstantial and seemingly insensible, was sitting inside the tree's hollow trunk.

Though Ian had tried desperately, he had been unable to rouse his wife from her magical sleep. But at Rajiv's touch Martha Hunter had opened her eyes and whispered, "There you are!"

When Ian had shouted with joy Martha drew back, as if she found the sudden outburst painful.

Behind him, Ian heard his friend Fallon breathe a sigh of relief. That sigh was easy enough to translate: *Maybe, just maybe, we will escape this strange prison after all.*

Most of the inmates of the Rainbow Prison — including the aggravating woman Felicity, who stood watching from a few feet away — could remain indefinitely without experiencing harm. That was because, like Martha, they were present in spirit only, their bodies remaining back in the physical world. But Ian, Fallon, and Rajiv had rashly entered this scarlet hell while still in their bodies. Because the Rainbow Prison was made only of light, they had been without food or water since they arrived . . . which was why Rajiv now had but hours to live; dehydration had taken hold of him. Ian figured he himself might have only a day before he suffered the same fate. Fallon, who seemed to have an unnatural vigor, would probably last longer, but even he must succumb sooner or later. Finding Martha had been the key to their chance for escape — and survival.

Turning toward his mysterious friend, Ian lifted Rajiv. Fallon bent, causing his golden hair to fall past his handsome, brown face. Then he scooped the boy into his muscular arms.

Looking up, Rajiv murmured, “Good news, Sahib Fallon! Now that we have found the memsahib we can go home.” He sighed, then added, “And if not, at least I got to see her. I am glad of that, since we worked so hard to reach her.” He sighed again. Then his head lolled to the right as he drifted back into unconsciousness.

Ian’s gut tightened. He had to get them out of here before it was too late for the boy. Aching to hold his wife, but knowing that her form was less substantial than mist, he whispered her name, packing a world of love and loss and longing into that one small word: *Martha.*

“Ian,” she whispered back, and he winced at the fear he heard blossoming in her voice. *“Ian, where am I?* Why is everything so red?”

“You are in the Rainbow Prison, my love. At least, your spirit is. I’ve come to fetch you, but we’ll have to work together to escape. Can you step out of the tree? I’d help, but, well . . .”

He put his hand on her arm to demonstrate. When his fingers passed through her arm as if she were nothing but a ghost, Martha screamed.

“Shhhh! Shhhh, love. It’s all right. Like most people here, you are present in spirit only.”

“Ian, I don’t understand! It seems as if I’ve been wandering in dreams for . . . for I don’t know how long. I had strange dreams, about you and a boy and a very tall man, dreams that you were searching for me. Before that I sensed Cara, once. At least, I think I did. Except she was so much older than she should be . . . almost a teenager!”

Ian flinched, but said nothing.

“It seemed like a dream,” said Martha. “Yet at the same time it felt more real than life.” She paused, looked around,

then asked again, “Where are we? And why is everything so red?”

“We’re in a place called the Rainbow Prison. Beloved sent you here.”

Martha’s face darkened. *“I hate that woman!”*

“You have good reason. We both do. Even so, without her I would not have found Cara.”

“You’ve found Cara? Where? *Where is she?”*

“In Luster.”

Martha closed her eyes. “Are you telling me it was all real, that everything Beloved told us was true?”

“Not all of it. Though her rage against the unicorns was real, it came from a horrible misunderstanding. But, yes . . . there really is a world that the unicorns fled to when they left Earth. And yes, she has been trying to exterminate them all. But that is not what is important right now. We need to get you back to Earth, back to the real world. Can you leave the tree?”

“Don’t be silly. Of course I can!”

But when Martha tried to stand, it proved impossible. Her face twisted in panic. “Ian, I can’t move!”

The fear in his wife’s voice pierced Ian Hunter’s heart, which was already sinking under the burden of his own fear. All through his search for Martha he had expected that she would be as the other prisoners in this place, free to wander about. But now it seemed that Beloved must

have double-ensorcelled her, not only sending her to the Rainbow Prison but also somehow binding her to this spot.

He called to mind the directions given to him by the Blind Man back in India — directions for which he had traded the occasional use of his eyesight.

“Here is what you will have to do, Mr. Hunter,” the man had said. “There must, by the laws of magic, be some object of power that was used to place your wife in the Rainbow Prison. Very likely, it was a ruby similar to the one you carry. If that is the case, then once you find your wife you should be able to use your own ruby to send her back to her body.”

“And if that is not the case?” Ian had asked.

The Blind Man had smiled ruefully, shrugged, and said, “That is a risk you must take. Now, assuming you do manage to send your wife back to her body, she must then find the focus object that matches yours. With that in hand, the two of you should be able to sing a connection into being.”

Ian would have queried the Blind Man on this, except that he knew that such singing was how Jacques — who might or might not be Martha's father — had pulled Cara and her grandmother out of the green shaft of the Rainbow Prison several weeks earlier.

“It is not easy to do this,” the Blind Man had continued. “It requires a deep connection of the heart. Obviously, the

song must be one that is of special meaning to both of you. And, of course, absent the focus object here on Earth, it will not work at all."

That was the big gamble, the one on which he had staked everything: that Martha would be able to find the matching ruby. Praying that his own ruby would indeed send her back, he reached into his pocket and said, "Martha, listen carefully. I am going to try to return you to your body."

Her eyes widened. "How?"

"With a ruby that Cara gave me . . . the same ruby that let you see her. If this works, then as soon as you are back in your body you must try to find a similar ruby that I hope will be hidden somewhere nearby. Once you have it, you and I should be able to use the jewels to pull the rest of us back to the physical world."

"How do we do that?"

He smiled. "Your mother was trapped in a place like this —"

Martha cut him off. Bitterness twisting her face, she said, "Do not speak to me of that woman! She is no mother of mine!"

Ian was startled by the venom in her voice, then understood. "Martha, there's a great deal you don't know yet. Once we're out of here, I'll tell you everything. At least, everything I know myself."

She looked as if she were about to cry, but it seemed tears were impossible in her current condition. With a heavy sigh she said, “I don’t understand any of this, Ian. I just want to go back to where we were before my mother stole Cara. *I want us to be a family again! ”*

Without thinking, Ian reached for her, then remembered he could not yet hold her. His voice thick with sorrow, he murmured, “We can’t go back, Martha. And we can’t retrieve those years. That doesn’t mean we can’t find something good in the future, all three of us — you, me, and Cara. But first we have to move through this.”

Martha nodded, then said softly, “I’m sorry, Ian. We’ll save that for later. What do I do once I find this jewel?”

“Sing to me.”

She gave her husband a skeptical look.

Lifting the great ruby, he said, “Hold the matching gem and start to sing. We’ll have to be open to each other, sweetling. Sing with open heart. As soon as I hear you, I’ll sing back.”

Martha shook her head, baffled, but said, “All right, I’ll try. But what do I sing?”

“How about, ‘The Heart That Stays True’?”

She smiled slightly, her face pained. It was “their song,” the one they had claimed as a mark of their love before their marriage, back when they were both teachers and the world had still made sense.

“Fallon and Rajiv will be coming with me,” continued Ian, hoping as he said it that this would indeed be the case.

She nodded, then said softly and with an odd mixture of anger and tenderness, “You have a lot of explaining to do, buster.”

“I know,” said Ian, though, in truth, he was not looking forward to those explanations. “All right, let’s try. Are you ready?”

Martha nodded again.

Ian extended the ruby.

Nothing happened.

“Touch it,” he urged.

“I can’t,” she whispered, her eyes desperate. “Ian, I can’t lift my hands!”

He moved the ruby closer, put it against Martha’s face, ran it along her arm.

Still nothing.

Desperate, but knowing he could not hurt flesh that was not there, he thrust the ruby directly into her chest.

Still nothing.

His own chest constricted. Everything, all their plans for escaping from the Rainbow Prison, had depended on finding Martha and using the ruby to send her back to Earth. And now the ruby had failed. He wanted to weep, to scream. Had they come so far, survived so much, for this?

Kneeling in front of the tree trunk, placing his hand close to the cheek he could not touch, Ian whispered, “I’m sorry, Martha. I’m so sorry.”

Before she could answer, a moan from Rajiv caught his attention. When he turned to ask if the boy’s condition had worsened, the look on Fallon’s face frightened him. Ian scrambled to his feet and hurried to the big man’s side. “Is he . . .”

Fallon shook his head. “He still lives. But I fear it will not be for long. I think that —”

*“Ian!”*

Spinning toward the tree, Ian Hunter was astonished to see his wife fading from sight. He flung himself toward her and reached into the tree trunk.

She vanished even as he tried to close his hands around her.

Ian staggered back, stunned. Then he wheeled on Felicity and roared, “What have you done now?”

The woman shook her head, and he could tell by the expression on her face that she had no more idea what had happened to his wife than he had.

“Perhaps the ruby had a delayed effect,” said Fallon.

“Possible, but not likely,” said Felicity. She crossed to the tree and peered into the now-empty trunk. “Gentlemen, I am as baffled as you are.” She smiled. “Isn’t it fascinating how mysterious this all is? If it weren’t a matter of life and

death for you, I’m sure you’d be enjoying this as much as I am.”

Rajiv moaned again, so softly it was like the slightest whisper of wind through leaves.

Ian sank to the ground and leaned against the trunk, staring at the space where his wife, who he had crossed two worlds to find, had, quite literally, just faded away, taking with her their last hope for escape.

# 4

# Dragon Task

***Luster: Autumngrove***

As the trembling of the ground subsided, Cara's initial panic was replaced by a quiet dread. Beloved was in Luster, that much seemed clear. But *where*?

The Queen and the Council were discussing this very matter. Cara felt honored to be included, but soon found herself frustrated as well. There was much of fear in the discussion and very little of practical ideas.

To make things worse, she was still exhausted from her journey to the Valley of the Centaurs. Struggling to stay awake, she leaned against the silvery-blue bark of an *eldrim* tree, staring at the golden hoofprint in the center of her right palm. It had appeared there after she had killed the Chiron, the King of the centaurs. She had done this, fulfilling his last and greatest wish, in return for the story she had been sent to seek. He had vowed he would only tell it to her if she agreed to crush the magical egg holding his life force, which had kept him unnaturally alive for many

centuries, until he had become little more than a withered husk.

Now, much as she tried to focus on the talk of the council, she found her mind drifting back to the story, which had cost her such torment of heart to learn. It was a tale both startling and disturbing, for it revealed that the unicorns had an enemy even more dangerous than Beloved. Even worse than that, this secret enemy — known only as “the Whisperer” — had been created from the unicorns’ own darkest feelings and urges.

The council had been arguing about this story and what it might mean when Beloved’s invasion had begun. Now all attention had turned to the immediate crisis. As Cara listened — *tried* to listen — she began to wonder if that long ago ceremony, in which the unicorns had tried to rid themselves of all that was less than perfect within themselves, might not also have robbed them of the fire they would need to fight Beloved’s invasion.

Moonheart’s deep voice caught her attention, bringing her back to the moment. *“Where* has the enemy entered?” he was saying. “That’s the most important question right now, Amalia. How far away are they?”

“M’Gama was trying to work out where Beloved would make her attempt,” replied the Queen. “But she has fallen out of contact — which is one more thing I am concerned

about. It is not like her to remain silent at a time like this. I fear something has happened to her."

"Without word from M'Gama, we have no way of knowing how quickly the Hunters will be upon us," said Fire-Eye. Like others in the council, Fire-Eye was a close relative of the Queen. His time as a member of the group was supposed to be over, but because of Amalia's own lack of experience, she had asked him to stay on.

"They might be anywhere!" fretted his brother, Silvertail.

Cara wished Lightfoot were beside her, so they could talk mind-to-mind, as they often did during such meetings. Then she wished she hadn't wished it, because wondering where he was, and what had happened to him, only added to her fear and despair.

The conversation went on. And on. When the Squijum came bounding out of the darkness to curl in her lap, she yawned and shook her head. His silly, furry presence was comforting. Despite the terrifying events, the night was cool, the air sweet. And she was, with good reason, exhausted.

In her dream Cara was searching for the Dimblethum. She was troubled, because she could not find the shaggy creature — who always made her think of a bear who had gone halfway to becoming a man — and she was beginning

to fear for him. The gruff beast had saved her from a delver when she first fell into Luster. Now, for some reason, *she* needed to help *him*.

But where was he?

Suddenly she heard him calling, as if from a great distance, “Cara! Cara, the Dimblethum has done a bad thing. The Dimblethum is sorry.”

She ran, trying to reach him, to comfort him, but found herself tangled in darkness. Her legs would not work, refused to run as she commanded them. The frustration was reaching panic level when the sound of her name being called for real woke her.

Cara blinked and sat up. The unicorns — and Alma Leonetti, the only other human present — were all looking in her direction.

“I am sorry to wake you, granddaughter,” said the Queen. “But we need you to join this discussion.”

Cara scrambled to her feet, embarrassed to have fallen asleep when so much was at stake. “I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “Sorry!”

“No need to apologize,” said gentle Cloudmane. “Your sleep is well-earned. It is we who are sorry to wake you. However, the conversation now concerns you.”

“Do you have something for me to do? Just tell me. I’ll do anything you ask!”

“Generally better to know what you are agreeing to before you make a statement like that,” said Alma Leonetti.

Cara remembered vividly the story that Grimwold had told during their journey to the Valley of the Centaurs, the tale of how Madame Leonetti had come to Luster as a young woman in order to plead for the unicorns to return to Earth. They had not done so, of course. But the old Queen had agreed to send one unicorn back, as a reminder of the beauty and the magic that had been lost when the unicorns fled. That unicorn, known as “the Guardian of Memory,” volunteered to spend twenty-five years on the home world, at which time it would be relieved by another. Their job was simple: For those humans sensitive enough to feel it, the Guardian’s very presence kept alive the memory of what it meant to have unicorns in the world.

Sadly, in more than one case, the Guardian had fallen prey to one of Beloved's Hunters and never returned to Luster.

Cara wondered what it must be like for Madame Leonetti to know that her request had cost the lives of several unicorns. Yet, it was clear she had an honored position here at the court. In fact, she had been allowed to drink from the Queen’s Pool, which was why she was still alive now, hundreds of years after she had first come to Luster.

It was all so hard to understand. . . .

“We have been talking about who might help us in our hour of need,” continued the old woman, “and Fire-Eye has put forth the idea of asking for assistance from one of the dragons.”

Cara felt a tightening in her heart. She had an idea where this was heading. “Which dragon?” she asked. “And why?”

Alma Leonetti smiled. “The why is easy. We need allies in the struggle to come, and there are none more powerful than the dragons. Even one of them would be an enormous aid to our cause. The question at hand is: Would you be willing to go and make the request?”

“Why me?” asked Cara, her voice smaller than she had intended. Immediately she felt embarrassed. Why question it? She had offered to do whatever was necessary. But . . . well, she had already faced two dragons, and while she knew she could, potentially, survive such an encounter, she also knew how terrifying it would likely be.

It was the Queen who answered. “We make the request of you for two reasons, granddaughter. The first is speed. None of the dragons are close at hand, and it would take days for any of us to reach them. However, Medafil has offered — after much fussing — to fly you to the dragon’s lair. Which means the journey will only take a couple of days.”

“And the second reason?”

“That should be obvious,” said Moonheart, never one to phrase things gently. “You have the gift of tongues and can speak to dragons in their own language. They respect this and will be more likely to respond as a result.”

“So which dragon would you like me to visit?” asked Cara. “Firethroat?”

She hoped that would be the case. She knew Firethroat and felt she would not be in great danger in her presence. The dragon would at the least be polite and might even be pleased to see her.

Alma Leonetti shook her head. “While the Lady Firethroat is fond of you personally, she is not especially a friend of the unicorns.”

“Certainly you don’t want me to ask Ebillan!”

Ebillan had been her second dragon, and he was another matter altogether. Cara had barely survived her encounter with that angry beast and had pretty much promised never to bother him again.

Alma Leonetti shuddered. “No, that one is best left at peace.”

“Then who?”

She knew Luster held five more dragons, but of these she knew nothing but their names: Red Rage, Fah Leing, Graumag, Bronzeclaw, and Master Bloodtongue.

“That question was debated at great length while you were sleeping,” said the old woman. “Though Fah Leing is

likely to be on our side, he might choose to take no side at all. Red Rage is far too unpredictable, and not one we would send you to speak to. Master Bloodtongue is aged and has not been heard from in years. That leaves Bronzeclaw and Graumag. Of these two, we think the one most likely to come to our aid is Graumag."

"Can you tell me about him?"

"Her, actually," said the Queen. "She is young, as dragons go, though she was one of the first to arrive in Luster."

"Why was that?"

Her grandmother shook her head. "We do not know. There has always been a bit of mystery about the Lady Graumag, even more than the others, all of whom keep to themselves."

"Then why do you think she would be the most likely to come to our aid?"

"Because I already have a good connection with her, due to having helped her with a small matter back in the days when I was known as the Wanderer."

Cara smiled. "Is there anyone you *didn't* meet back then?"

"I lived as of Ivy Morris for quite a long time, and covered a lot of territory as I traveled through those years."

Alma Leonetti spoke up. "Though Graumag is basically a solitary beast, she is friendlier than most and will gladly talk with anyone who comes through her territory." She bit

her lip, then added, “Unfortunately, that territory is on Dark Mountain, which rises on the southwest shore of the Lake of Tears. It is a place that is more exciting than it is pleasant.”

“What does *that* mean?” Cara asked, feeling that the simple fact of the mountain having a dragon in residence ought to be excitement enough.

“Eternal clouds loom over its peak, and thunder and lightning are nearly constant. Very little grows on the mountain's slopes, since so little light penetrates the clouds. As the Queen has told you, Medafil has agreed to fly you there. That is assuming you accept the task, of course. You are free to say no. But we asked you because the fastest way to reach Graumag is by flying, and your gryphon friend cannot carry a unicorn — or even, until his wing is more fully healed, a large human.”

“You do not have to accept this task, Cara,” said her grandmother gently. “You have already done more than your share by making the journey to the Valley of the Centaurs.”

“I’ll go,” said Cara. “Of course I’ll go!”

She was pleased that she was able to hide her fear so well that her voice barely trembled.

# 5

# In the Hall of the Delver King

***Luster: Delvharken***

When M'Gama had been captured at the base of the Axis Mundi by a cove of delvers, she had expected torment, perhaps even death. So the Geomancer had been surprised when the creatures treated her with what seemed like a degree of awe . . . though whatever awe they might be feeling did not stop them from binding and gagging her before they carried her underground.

They grumbled and complained as they did all this, and M’Gama was startled to realize she could make out their words, or at least most of them; their language seemed to be nothing more than a badly mangled form of the speech used by dwarves. The thought brought a pang of memory, as it made her think of her cherished servant Flensa, so recently killed in the delver attack on Stonehaven, the home they shared.

M’Gama’s captors carried the ebony-skinned woman into their underground world through a cave not far from the Axis Mundi, five of them holding her bound form over their

heads as if she were nothing but a log. She managed to shoot one glance backward before they went underground, looking to the great world tree as if it could somehow save her. In truth, her greatest hope at the moment was that *she* had managed to save *it*, by means of the rootwood spell she had been casting when the delvers overcame her. The spell had been but three-quarters finished. Would it be enough?

Once underground, they traveled down a steep slope for several minutes. The Geomancer was intrigued to see that the passage was dimly lit by glowing orange lines that ran along the walls. At the bottom of the slope, her captors stopped and put her down in order to add one more element to her imprisonment: a blindfold.

As soon as the blindfold was in place, one of the delvers chanted something. Then they picked her up and began to move again. Almost at once a strange tingling ran across her entire body. She bit her lip to keep from crying out, and the sensation passed in but an instant.

This odd prickly feeling was repeated twice over the next several minutes, and she wondered what caused it. Shortly after the second repeat, she heard a grinding sound, followed by a gravelly voice screeching, “Halt! Who seeks to enter the Great Hall of Gnurflax, King of Delvharken?”

“I am Braxton, leader of the Twelfth Cove. My cousins and I return from the great tree with a gift for the King.”

“What is this gift?” demanded the first voice.

Braxton could scarcely contain his glee. “We bring him . . . the Geomancer!”

“Oh, I envy you,” said the first voice. “This is a great prize indeed. Enter, and be welcome.”

Beyond him, M’Gama heard another delver voice, deeper and richer than that of most delvers, bellowing, “I want Namza! Where is Namza? He can’t simply have disappeared!”

“This is a good time to bring such a gift,” whispered the guard who had challenged their arrival. “The King is unhappy.”

“With Namza?” asked Braxton, and M’Gama could hear the surprise in his voice. “I thought he trusted the wizard with his life.”

“He does,” replied the guard. “Or did. The problem is, Namza is nowhere to be found. The King has been furious at his absence. We will all be glad of something that might change his mood.”

A bit more carrying followed, then the delvers set her down. Rough hands stripped away her blindfold, revealing an enormous cavern that was dimly lit by pots of glowing fungus. Arrayed at the cavern’s far side were nearly two dozen delver guards. Each gripped a spear and stood at rigid attention. Pressed against the walls — or, in some cases, against thick stalagmites — the guards seemed so much a part of the cavern that it would have been easy for

eyes less sharp, or less accustomed to low light than M’Gama’s, to miss them.

Even so, they were a minor concern for the Geomancer at the moment. Her focus was on the large delver directly ahead of her, who wore a crown of reddish brown stone. He sat on a throne, which was situated on a raised platform. With a start, M’Gama realized that both throne and platform had been carved from what had once been a massive stalagmite rising from the cavern floor. It was beautiful work, but also, to her mind, something close to a sacrilege.

Though her hands were still bound, she managed to bring herself to a standing position. At well above six feet the Geomancer towered over the delvers, most of whom were barely half her height. Her ebony skin, high cheekbones, full mouth, and broad nose were also a stark contrast with the pale delvers, whose lips were thin and whose noses were little more than two gaping holes in the center of their faces. Only their eyes, made for seeing in the dark, were larger than hers.

M’Gama was dressed in traveling clothes — sturdy trousers, a linen shirt, a simple but beautifully made brown cloak. Her proud stance gave even these humble garments a look of elegance — as did the many rings she wore on her left hand, the stones of which seemed to glow with their own light even in this dim cavern.

As for King Gnurflax, he was dressed in a gray tunic and a short brown robe, both coarsely made, but still of better weave than was typical of delver clothing. His eyes burned with feverish intensity, and it was clear that he was delighted to discover who had fallen into his clutches. Digging his fingers into a bowl of freshly gathered grubs, he popped a handful of the squirming things into his mouth and chewed contentedly.

"So," he said at last, pausing to push half of a grub off his lower lip and back into his mouth, "the famous Earth Magician has finally come to visit the Children of the Earth."

M'Gama blinked at the reference to "the Children of the Earth." That was also how dwarves thought of themselves. Despite her surprise, she did not bother to answer Gnurflax. Instead, she simply returned his stare with a fierce dignity.

Her gaze infuriated Gnurflax. "Don't play your silent games with me, woman! You and I have loathed each other at a distance for years now. Why not say what you think?"

M'Gama replied by spitting on the floor.

The King leaped to his feet. But before he could say or do more, a look of shock crossed his face.

The other delvers looked at each other in confusion, clearly not feeling whatever it was that had made the King pause.

M’Gama, however, did feel it, and felt, as well, a wave of loss and terror.

Gnurflax hooted in glee. “He did it!” he cried. “He did what he promised!”

“You fool!” snapped M'Gama. “Do you have any idea what has just happened?”

“We have opened the way for my ally to enter Luster and help us rid our world of unicorns,” he replied smugly.

“You'll be lucky if you live long enough to see that day. And even if you do, it's unlikely you will live long enough to enjoy it.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Gnurflax. His voice held a dangerous edge.

“I'm talking about what I learned from Master Bloodtongue, Luster's oldest dragon. Beloved has made her entry directly *through* the Axis Mundi. She has wounded the tree, with a wound that may prove fatal. If so, it will be the death knell for all of Luster. This world cannot survive the loss of that tree!”

“You lie!” shrieked Gnurflax. “Braxton! Silence her and carry her to the dungeons.”

“Silence me if you will,” said M'Gama. “That will not undo the damage that has been done to our world.”

Then she threw back her head and unleashed a wail that drowned out the King’s voice. Her cry echoed from the

walls long after the guards had knocked her to the floor and gagged her once again.

M’Gama did not struggle as the five delvers carried her out of the Great Hall, again holding her over their heads as if she were no more than a log they were taking from one place to another. She was too overwhelmed with dread at what had just happened.

The delvers eventually deposited her in a room-sized cave. It was lit, barely, by orange stripes like those that ran along the passageways. Without a word, her captors chained her to one of the walls. In an odd way, the imprisonment was almost kind. They secured only one ankle and one wrist, and both chains were of sufficient length to allow her to sit on the stone outcropping at her right, even to lie down if she wished. Additionally, she noticed a small pool, fed by a trickle of water, in a declivity to her left. So, she would not want for something to drink. She suspected they might even provide food — though she also suspected it would take two or three days of hunger to make whatever they gave her seem edible.

Still not speaking, the delvers left the chamber. A few minutes later the orange stripes faded, and the darkness around her was complete.

M’Gama didn’t mind; she spent much of her time underground and was used to darkness. In truth, she was relieved to be alone at last. She needed to think.

The big question, she decided, was how severe the damage to the Axis Mundi had been. She had tried her best to save the tree from destruction by weaving a spell of protection as she placed the four pieces of enchanted rootwood given to her by Master Bloodtongue into its trunk. Unfortunately, the delvers had captured her before she had completed the spell. So she could not know how much effect it would have.

As she continued to brood, she changed her mind. The truly big question was not how much damage had been done, but whether there was any way to *heal* the Axis Mundi. She leaned against the wall, then pressed herself to it, trying to draw strength from the stone around her. It worked — she did feel strength flowing into her.

At the same time she felt something that filled her with new terror. The world was quivering. It was the tiniest of vibrations, nothing that anyone not as attuned to stone as she was would even notice. But she had no doubt that it was there.

And then the Geomancer felt something else, something that caused her to stretch her senses in the way of someone trying to discern a faint smell caught on the softest of breezes.

Yes, there it was again! This time she could tell what it was, and she nearly cried out in shock. Not far from her someone of great power — power much like hers, power

rooted in stone and tied to Luster — was held by some strange enchantment.

Who was it? Where was he — or she — imprisoned?

The Geomancer opened her senses, reached out all around her. But the touch of magic had flickered out, as if whoever it had come from was exhausted.

# 6

# The Calling of the Cove

***Luster: the Wilderness***

After leaving the Valley of the Centaurs, the delver that Cara had nicknamed Rocky spent the better part of two nights wandering in a vaguely homeward direction.

In a very undelver-like way, he traveled aboveground. This was partly because the tunnels of Delvharken would be dangerous for him. He was, after all, still supposed to be locked in the King's dungeons, and he was fairly certain his fellow delvers all knew it.

His other reason for staying above ground was that he was deeply confused by what he had learned about the origins of his people. He could not decide what, if anything, he should do with the information, and simply did not want to see any other delvers until he had been able to think it through.

Normally he would have taken the story straight to King Gnurflax. However, since it was Gnurflax who had stripped him of his true name and then sent him to the dungeons, it

was unlikely he would find a willing ear there. Rocky thought several times about trying to contact his teacher but feared that even the attempt would endanger the old delver, whom he loved and honored above all others. Not that danger wasn't all around now, anyway. But his teacher would be in no position to help when things got worse — as they were sure to — if the King had already dismissed him because of his disgraceful student.

Finally Rocky decided to act as any proper delver would and seek out a cave where he could think in peace.

It did not take long to find a place that suited his needs. It was a great relief to hide himself in the cave's darkness, which was even blacker than that of the night outside. After unbuckling the short sword the centaurs had given him, Rocky settled into a corner. It was nicely cold and hard. He crossed his hands over his chest and closed his eyes.

By the time the sun's rays began to spill in at the front of the cave, Rocky was unhappy to discover that he did indeed know what he must do next. It was not a pretty thought.

Sighing, he got to his feet and began to search for the stones he would need. The task took longer than he expected, for they had to be exactly right. But in time he had eleven smooth stones arranged in front of the place where he had been sitting.

Picking up the first stone, he named it — being careful to get the pronunciation precise and exact. Then he spat on the stone and put it back on the cave floor. He lifted the second stone and performed the same ritual, though with a different name. He repeated this until he had named all his cousins. He then returned to his place and sat facing the semicircle of stones. Closing his eyes, Rocky crossed his arms, placed his palms flat against his chest, and began to chant.

Rocky's cousin Razka was the first to feel the call, which started like an itch at the back of his brain. He didn't know what it was at first and shook his head, trying to dislodge the strange feeling. It did no good; the itchy-tingly tickle persisted. It reminded him of the sensation you get when you run into a cobweb in the dark, except that instead of being on his skin it was *inside* his head. Razka felt a rising panic, wondering if some strange night creature had crawled into his ear while he was sleeping and was now burrowing through his brain.

"Razka!" growled Pedrak, the leader of his new cove. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," said Razka quickly.

"Then stop that blasted twitching!"

Razka hated Pedrak, and didn't want to give the *skwarmint* any excuse to apply discipline. He sighed. In truth, Pedrak wasn't all that bad. It was just that Razka didn't really belong with this cove, and neither Razka nor Pedrak could forget that fact. But the King had assigned Razka here after sundering Razka's proper cove, and who were they to argue? The maddening sensation continued. Finally, Razka recognized it for what it actually was: the nearly irresistible cousin-call. All delvers knew of this, but it was rarely used, since cousins almost always traveled together, anyway.

Who was calling?

Razka stopped, let the feeling wash over him, and sighed again. It was the nameless one, of course. Hadn't that dratted delver — Razka couldn't even think of what to call him — caused enough trouble? Stones and bones! He was the main reason the cousins had been scattered to different coves, flung like a handful of pebbles to places where they did not belong and were not truly welcome.

Razka tried to shut out his cousin's call, but it did no good. The itchy feeling grew stronger.

In the cave, Rocky could feel the connections begin. First Razka, then the twins Erkza and Rendzi, then Gratz, who was the youngest of the cousins — came within his web.

But he needed more.

His arms began to ache, but he did not lower his palms from his chest. His throat grew parched and dry, but he did not cease his chanting. His head throbbed from the effort, but he did not break his focus.

He had more connections to make.

Zagrat was scrabbling over a slope of broken shale when he felt the call. Like Razka, he experienced it first as an itching at the back of his skull. Unlike Razka, he knew immediately what it meant and did not resist. He looked ahead. The rest of his new cove was moving on, ignoring him as usual. Without another thought, Zagrat turned and began trotting in the other direction. Curses and rockfalls to the King and his orders! The cousin-call was sacred, and the King was crazy, anyway.

Rocky was relieved when he felt the connection to Zagrat. He was the oldest and wisest of the cousins, and the one who most agreed that the King had indeed gone mad. Adding him to the four who were already responding left only two more to pull in. He would have greatly preferred to bring together all eleven of his cousins, but that was unlikely. Some would be too far away, some too stubborn,

or angry, or frightened to answer the call. Even getting seven (enough, with himself, to make a *kurtzen*, a working cove) was going to be difficult.

His focus was broken when he felt something he had never before experienced, never even imagined was possible. The floor of the cave trembled beneath him! A jolt of terror shot through the delver. What was that? What could have caused it?

He shook himself. He had no time for such questions. If he lost the connection to his cousins now he might never regain it.

He was tempted to furrow his brow and concentrate harder, but knew that would do no good. You couldn't force this kind of magic. In fact trying too hard could actually block it. He needed to try not to try, which was hard in itself. The secret was to sink further into his own mind, to send the call from a deeper, stronger, more real part of his own being. It was dangerous; if you went too deep you might be locked in the Stone forever. But it had to be done. Setting aside his fear, breathing ever more slowly, Rocky abandoned himself to himself.

As he did, the Stone began to reclaim him.

# DAY ONE OF THE INVASION

In every separation lie the seeds of reunion,
in every reunion the seeds of separation.

—Sebastian the Scrivener
*First Chronicle Keeper of Luster, Second Scroll*

# 7

# The Home World

***Earth: Castle Blood***

Lightfoot raised his head. Everything was dark, and he was in pain. The world felt strange beneath him, and he realized he was lying not on forest floor or grassy meadow, but smooth stones.

Slowly, memories came drifting back — first the horrid sight of that gaping hole being ripped through the world tree as Beloved blasted her way into Luster; then the invasion of the Hunters, with Beloved herself at their head; and finally the memory of being attacked by two of those Hunters and of leaping, in order to escape, through the very opening that Beloved had created.

He shook his head in disbelief. *He was on Earth!* He had to get back to Luster, get back to warn the others. But something Beloved had said to one of her men floated up from memory, something about not passing back through the gate too quickly.

With a shudder, he remembered the grisly death that had taken the Hunter who followed him through the tunnel. That was what Beloved had been talking about! Clearly he had to let some time pass before he could return to Luster. The question was, How *much* time? Beloved had spoken of hours. But how could a unicorn measure an hour? And how many of them had gone by while he was unconscious? It was still dark, as it had been when he came through the gate. Did that mean he had slept only a little while, or that he had slept straight through another day while his body tried to heal?

Of course, that was assuming day and night in this spot were perfectly matched to where he had come from in Luster, which seemed unlikely.

He stretched, then shuddered as a throb of pain shot through his chest. Well, at least that was a clear sign that not too much time had gone by. If he had slept through another day, his natural healing magic would have done more work by now. Then he realized that even the passage of time would not have been enough to heal him, since there was still a dagger protruding from his chest.

Lightfoot bent his head and tried to grab the hilt of the blade with his teeth, but failed on his first and second tries. Twisting his neck painfully, stretching, straining until he thought his veins would burst, the Prince finally managed to get a grip on the hilt. With an agonizing wrench he

extracted the blade. An arc of silver-crimson blood spurted from the wound, but quickly ceased to flow. Lightfoot waited, breathing slowly and carefully, as the wound sealed itself. It was not completely healed and still throbbed with pain, but the worst was over.

He closed his eyes and tried to think. The question remained: How long had he been here? He was aching to return to Luster, but could not go back too soon. He shivered again at the memory of the Hunter who had pursued him through the tree. He was haunted by the grotesque way the man’s skin had bubbled and burned as the warring magics of a too-swift attempt to return to Earth through that passage had quickly, and painfully, brought on his death.

The gate to Luster, waiting only a few yards away, seemed to beckon him. Lightfoot gazed longingly at the opening, which was embedded directly into the main gate of the castle itself. Unlike the opening in Luster, the edges of this gate were smooth and even. The sight of it was agonizing. The invasion had begun, he was needed, and Luster was mere steps away. Yet the burned and twisted body that lay between the gate and where the Prince stood served as a horrible warning. He would do the unicorns no good if he hurried back to their world only to die moments after arriving!

With a sigh, the Prince heaved himself to his feet. His eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, which was alleviated by the shreds of moonlight that made their way through the heavily clouded sky, as well as the faint glow of the opening to Luster. In the dim light, he could see the remains of the Hunter who had followed him — little more than bones now, the skeleton twisted by the man's final agonies.

The Prince turned away.

Looking around, he was able to discern that he was in the courtyard of a great fortress. Cara had told him about human buildings, and he had seen a few in Luster, M'Gama's house being the most elaborate. But he had never imagined anything such as this, so grand and vast, with towers that seemed to scratch the sky itself.

What kind of power and skills did these humans have to create such wonders? And how much did they cut themselves off from the world by doing it? You could stay within those towers and never feel the rain, or the sun on your skin, or the bite of cold.

The very idea made Lightfoot sad, and he felt sorry for the humans.

He was trying to decide what to do next when his body suddenly informed him that his first need was for food and water. Glancing around, he thought, *Well, if Beloved and*

*the Hunters were living here, the castle must have some source of water. It shouldn't be too hard to find.*

It didn't him take long to discover that there was indeed a well in the courtyard. But unicorns are not made to turn handles or raise buckets, so whatever water was there would do him no good.

Frustrated — and far thirstier than he had been before discovering the useless well — Lightfoot continued his explorations. Soon he came to the castle doors. They towered above him, a pair of massive wooden slabs carved with strange images and, like the well, clearly not designed for a creature without hands. But Lightfoot was desperate, and after several minutes he managed to use his horn to trip the latch. At once the door on his right creaked open a fraction of an inch, just enough for him to insert the tip of his horn and ease it a bit farther. Into that new space he hooked his right front hoof. He gave a sharp tug — and the door swung smoothly open.

The Prince stepped inside, shuddering to think that he, a unicorn, was entering the very heart of Beloved's domain.

He found himself in a large room, most of its space taken up by several long tables. This must be where the Hunters gathered to eat. Unfortunately, the tables were bare.

At one side of the room he saw a broad stairwell.

He sighed. *I suppose I'd better see what's up there.*

He started up the steps, thankful he had had a chance to practice using the confounded things at M'Gama's home. Though he suspected that Beloved had brought all her Hunters to Luster, he moved with a unicorn's silence, anyway. No point in taking any chances.

On the first level above the great hall, he found a long corridor lined with bedrooms on either side. Not one of them looked as if it had been used in many years.

The next floor contained more of the same.

The main stairwell ended here. But at either end of the corridor was another set of stairs, each of them tightly winding. These, guessed Lightfoot, must lead up into the towers he had seen from the courtyard.

He resisted the thought of climbing them. The curve of the stairwell was so tight that his body would be twisting all the way up. He feared slipping and, even worse, reaching a point where he could not turn around, so that he would have to make the trip down going backwards.

Still, the chance that he might find something, anything, that would be of use in the struggle against Beloved was not to be denied. So up he went, ignoring the pain that his half-healed wounds still gave him.

The tower had five levels, each level holding a single room, each room empty. The stairwell continued on, ending at last at a ceiling. Oddly, the stair went right up to this barrier.

Examining it more closely, the Prince realized it was actually a door, held shut by a latch. Though he did not have words for either of these things, he could see the outline of how it was supposed to open and a metal device that held it shut.

Frustration boiled within him. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself, then studied the situation again. Soon he figured out how the latch worked and realized it might be possible to move it with his horn.

Possible, but not easy. Forcing himself to take slow, careful breaths, he poked at it with the tip of his horn. He was fearful of breaking off the point, for though the horn was strong and sturdy, it was not invincible. Just thinking of the way Whiteling's horn had broken off in Beloved's chest made him cautious.

His patience was finally rewarded when the latch slid aside. Bowing his head — he did not want to push up with his horn — he braced his neck against the barrier.

It lifted easily.

The sun was rising as Lightfoot came out onto the roof, a broad, flat area surrounded by a chest-high wall. He went to the edge. Far below stretched an exquisite landscape of woods and small lakes, gilded with rose and gold from the morning light. In the distance he saw snow-capped mountains.

The sight twisted something inside Lightfoot and an unexpected ache pierced him. *Home*, he thought. *This is home!*

Confusion swept over him. Luster was his home, and he loved it. But this place, this Earth . . . this was where the unicorns had been born, where they had lived until the Hunt had driven them out. *This* was home, too — home in some deep and ancient way he could not understand but that ripped at his heart.

The Prince felt a stinging in his eyes, and his vision grew blurry. He had a moment of panic before he realized with astonishment that he was doing something he had thought only humans were capable of.

He was weeping.

# 8

# Blessings and Farewells

***Luster: Autumngrove***

“Are you ready to make our good-byes to your grandmother?” asked Medafil.

Cara looked up at the gryphon and nodded.

He twisted his enormous eagle’s head to one side to stare at her. “You’re sure?”

She nodded again.

“Well, then, dag-flammit, let’s do it.”

By “it” the gryphon meant their visit to Cara’s grandmother, a necessary precursor to their mission. Though they both loved Amalia Flickerfoot, neither of them were entirely comfortable with her, since until a little while ago they had known her only as Ivy Morris. For Medafil, she was still, in many ways, the girl he had befriended long ago. For Cara, she was not only the grandmother who had lovingly raised her, but also the person who had stolen her from her parents. And now, restored to her true form,

Amalia Flickerfoot was, for both of them, the Queen of the unicorns.

“Let’s do it,” agreed Cara.

They set out for the Queen’s clearing. As they walked, Cara reflected on the fact that some of her uneasiness came simply because her grandmother was so different than she used to be. It was not just her shape that had changed. Ivy Morris was changing in other ways, too. As a human, she had been quiet and gentle. In her true form of Amalia Flickerfoot, however, she carried herself with a strength and pride Cara did not recognize. Oh, there was still enough of the old Ivy Morris in the Queen that Cara knew without a doubt who she was, who she had been. Even so, it hurt that the last seemingly solid foundation in her life had been shattered.

And that was not the only thing troubling her. Cara was also aware that she still harbored deep anger over the discovery that her grandmother had fled with her as a child, then let her believe that her parents were dead. The two of them had talked that out, and she now understood, at least somewhat, the reasons for her grandmother’s desperate actions. But understanding was not the same as forgiving, and not all of the bitterness had faded.

Cara’s thoughts were interrupted by a soft sound from Medafil. Blinking, she realized they had reached the Queen’s clearing. She did not know the unicorn who stood

guard at the entrance, but given the hundreds of unicorns that had poured into Autumngrove over the last few days that was no surprise. The unicorn, on the other hand, knew at once who she was. That was no surprise, either, since she was the only human girl among them.

“The Queen is waiting to see you,” said the guard. Then he stepped aside so Cara and Medafil could pass.

Cara’s grandmother stood with her back to them, her head drooping. She turned quickly when she heard them enter the clearing. Though clearly glad to see them, she could not hide the weariness and concern that marked her face.

Cara wanted to say something, but “You look so worried” seemed flat-out foolish. How could the Queen not be worried? All of Luster was under attack, and the responsibility for defending it fell on her shoulders. Not knowing what else to do, Cara simply said, “I wish I could do more to help.”

Her grandmother shook her head, causing her mane to ripple like silk spun from moonlight. “The regrets are all mine, dear child. You have already done far more than was fair of me to ask. And now you and Medafil have accepted yet another mission. This means a great deal to me, though my own wish is that I could shield you from all this.”

“You shielded me all my life!” cried Cara. Then, unable to resist, and a bit more sharply than she had intended, she

added, “Longer than you should have, with some things.”

Amalia Flickerfoot sighed, knowing what she was referring to. “I learned my lessons as a human all too well, granddaughter. Stealth, slyness, deceit — they are not the unicorn way. And yet —”

Cara gasped. “And yet they may be just what we need!”

Her grandmother looked at her in puzzlement.

“Think about it, Gramma. Beloved expects you all to act like . . . well, like unicorns. But remember what Alma Leonetti said just before the Blood Moon rose? ‘Maybe you need to take back some of that darkness you once released.’ Out of all the unicorns, *you* are the one who has some of that darkness. You learned it as a human. Don’t do what Beloved expects — don’t act like a unicorn! Maybe that way we’ll have a better chance at survival!”

The Queen laughed, but not derisively. “Wouldn’t it be an odd stroke of luck if the years I spent in human form, not even knowing who I really was, turned out to be the key to our salvation? I’ve been fighting that part of myself, trying to return to being fully unicorn. But what I learned as a human may be part of the solution. It may, indeed.”

Cara smiled.

“Given the quality of that advice,” continued the Queen, “you make me reconsider the mission I’ve given you. I’m tempted to keep you here as one of my councilors. But we

really must try to enlist Graumag to our cause, and you are the best one to make this journey."

"I know. And I'm glad to accept the task."

"As I was certain you would be."

Cara's heart lifted at the pride she could hear in her grandmother's voice.

"And you, old friend," said Amalia, turning to Medafil. "Once again you come to my aid."

"As you have more than once done for me."

The Queen sighed. "Those were interesting times, were they not, Medafil?"

"Oh, very interesting. I think of them often. We were frequently in a biff-snippled pile of trouble."

"But never trouble such as this," whispered the Queen, looking past Medafil, past Cara, as if trying to peer into the future.

"May the time of simple troubles come again," replied Medafil softly.

Cara went to her grandmother and put her arms around her neck. As always since the transformation, she felt a pang of sorrow that her grandmother could not return the embrace.

"Travel safe, travel well, little wanderer," murmured the Queen. "May those who have gone before be always with you."

“And with you,” replied Cara, tightening her grip on her grandmother’s neck and burying her face in the silken mane. They stood that way for a long moment, both acutely aware that it was possible they might never see each other again, and not only because of the dangerous task Cara was undertaking. Now that Beloved was in Luster, everyone was at risk.

“I love you,” whispered Cara at last.

“And I you,” replied her grandmother.

Cara released her grip and stepped back. Medafil, too, said his farewell to the Queen. Then the girl and the gryphon left the clearing. Cara glanced back once as they did.

The Queen had turned away. Her head was drooping again.

When she was alone in her clearing once more, Amalia Flickerfoot reflected on what her granddaughter had said.

Maybe the key did lie in her human side.

She thought, too, about the strange story Cara had brought back from the Valley of the Centaurs. Could it be true? If so, was this “Whisperer” at large in Luster even now? If they managed to survive the Hunt, what were they to do about him?

She sighed. It was too much. But Luster was hers to defend, and she would rise to the occasion — or die trying.

# 9

# A Dream Within Stone

***Luster: Delvharken***

Namza, the king’s wizard, slept the sleep of Stone.

This sleep was deep, undisturbed . . . and unintended.

It was happening because Namza had decided to spy on King Gnurflax as the monarch conferred with the mysterious whispering voice that seemed to be not merely guiding but also warping his decisions. After silently following Gnurflax to the cave where Namza knew the king spoke to the voice, the old wizard had pressed himself to the tunnel floor just outside the entrance. Moving silently, on his belly, he had inched forward until he could see around the lowest edge of the cave’s opening.

Once in place he had lifted a thin slice of mica into which he had poured an enormous amount of magic. Peering through it, he had tried to see who spoke to the King. But his attempt had attracted the bodiless voice, and at once Namza had felt its fierce attention shift toward him, felt the strange power of its eyeless gaze. Unexpectedly terrified,

the old stone wizard had willed his heart to still its ferocious beating, his lungs to still their need for air, his body to still its functions, slowing, slowing all signs of life as he tried to make himself unnoticeable.

In this attempt the wizard had succeeded all too well, passing from living delver to stone. Though he was not dead, it was possible he might never return from this sleep.

As he slept within the Stone, Namza began to dream. The images sometimes shifted, as they will in dreams, merging and sliding into one another. But they were also crystal clear, for they were not inventions, but true memories of his youth . . .

Namza's first dream was of his *nakken-gar,* the year of wandering that was part of his apprenticeship to his own teacher, Metzram, who was the king's wizard at that time. On the eve of the *nakken-gar,* Metzram had charged him with a task, as was traditional. In this case, it was to fetch some stones from the edge of a dragon's cave.

"The stones there will have absorbed great power," Metzram had told his pupil, "a power we can use in our spells." His scratchy voice solemn, he added, "Let me wish you success, my student. I would not like to lose you, as I did the last two students who attempted this task."

Then Metzram brought out a map, which showed the locations of the seven dragons that shared their world. Together he and Namza decided that it was Bronzeclaw’s cave to which Namza would travel.

“I will not see you again for a year,” said Metzram. Which was only right, for to return before the year was up would be a great shame. Crossing his arms over his chest, the old wizard murmured, “Earth and water, air and fire, may you find your heart’s desire.”

Namza repeated his teacher's gesture and the words. The next morning he began his journey.

He set out with high hopes, traveling at night, as was proper, and finding dark places to rest during the painful daylight hours. It was interesting to see the strange world aboveground on his own, rather than with his cove, as was the usual way. He took his time traveling to Bronzeclaw’s cave. He felt no need to hurry, since even if he succeeded in gaining the stones, he could not return to Delvharken before the year was out.

At the half-year mark, Namza reached the dragon’s cave, which was set well above the tree line on a high and desolate mountain. He approved; the starkness of the stone held great beauty to his delver eyes.

The next stage of his task was to learn the dragon’s patterns. To do that, he needed to find a hiding place far enough from the beast’s lair to not be easily noticed, yet

close enough for him to be able to observe Bronzeclaw's comings and goings. The spot he chose would also have to shield him from the relentless sun. It took hours of searching, but he finally located a small cave that would serve nicely. After driving out the furry creature that inhabited it, he settled in to watch.

It didn’t take long to discover that the dragon hunted by dark. This was a great relief to Namza, as it would spare him having to cross the wide expanse of stone while exposed to the hideous sunlight.

After several nights he felt confident he could predict when it was safe to gather the stones he was seeking, and the next time Bronzeclaw left to hunt, Namza began the climb up to the cave.

Alas, he had been overconfident. To reach the dragon’s lair took more hours than he had expected. And finding the best stones, the ones that radiated the magic Metzram had taught him to look for, became deeply absorbing. There were so many to choose from, and he wanted the best for his teacher. He smiled with pleasure each time he located one that had special strength.

Even though this took more time than he had planned, all might still have been well had not Bronzeclaw returned far earlier than Namza had thought likely. He was just tucking the last of the stones into the pouch at his side when he heard a rustle of wings. The sound struck terror into his

heart. Spinning, he saw the great beast — fiery orange, save for its enormous claws, which were indeed bronze — swooping toward him out of the darkness. Namza opened his mouth and cried out in terror. At the same moment, the dragon opened its own huge mouth and unleashed a gout of flame that came within inches of searing off the delver's skin.

Namza turned and fled. Bronzeclaw was approaching far faster than he could run, but he knew it would take a few moments — how many he wasn't sure — before the flying horror could unleash another stream of fire.

Reaching a ledge, Namza scrambled over. In his haste and fear, he misjudged the terrain — something shameful for a delver — and began a long, painful fall down the mountainside.

In his dream, the fall into darkness seemed to go on forever.

# 10

# A Slumber Like Death

***Earth: Castle Blood***

Lightfoot found it harder to descend the stairs than it had been to climb them. After managing one flight, almost falling more than once, he stepped into the adjoining room so he could turn and back down the rest of the way. That method proved easier after all, even if somewhat nerve-wracking.

He finally reached the long hall from which the two towers rose. His thirst and hunger were worse, his wounds still ached, and the effort of going up and down the spiral stairs, so unnatural for a unicorn, had tired his still-healing body to the bone. Wearily, he stared along the corridor. It seemed unlikely the tower at the other end would hold anything different. Even so, and much as he tried to talk himself out of it, the Prince knew he had to explore it.

*The war has started*, he reminded himself. *Unicorns may be dying already. If I'm not in Luster to help, I have to do whatever I can from here.*

He shook himself, then walked the length of the corridor and started up the other tower stair.

The first three rooms were empty. But when he peered into the room on the tower's fourth floor, one level below the topmost chamber, he found it well furnished, with a plush carpet, several chairs and dressers, and a large, canopied bed surrounded by scarlet curtains.

His first thought was that this must be Beloved's room. Then he spotted, through an opening in the curtains, a body on the bed.

Cautiously, Lightfoot crossed the room. Using the tip of his horn he pushed aside the curtain.

On the bed lay a beautiful woman dressed all in white. She was as unmoving as one dead, yet somehow the Prince sensed that she still lived.

Though he had never seen her before, Lightfoot knew at once who she must be. In this place, and with that flowing red hair, who could she be if not Cara's mother?

He tilted his head and studied her more intensely, thinking, *If she really is Cara's mother, that means she is the child born to the Queen during the years when she was trapped in human form.*

Which — strange as it seemed — meant that he and she were some degree of cousin.

Lightfoot shook his head in puzzlement. The sight of Martha Hunter — so like a grown version of Cara — filled

him with an odd mix of feelings, the strongest of which was a new pang of fear for what might be happening to Cara right now.

He dragged his thoughts back to the present. Deciding he should try to wake the woman, he snorted and tapped his hooves against the floor, softly at first, then harder, then harder still, until the room was filled with a sound like the ringing of silvery bells.

The woman did not shift or stir.

Lightfoot shook his head, this time in vexation. Why did she not wake? Had he been mistaken in his belief that she still lived? But if she was dead, why was her body here on this bed?

Then he remembered: Beloved had exiled Martha Hunter's spirit to the Rainbow Prison, just as she had done to the Queen's spirit when she was still Ivy Morris. The reason he could not rouse Martha was simple: She was not here to be roused! What he saw before him was only an empty shell. The real Martha Hunter was far, far away, her true self trapped in another world.

Lightfoot cast his mind back to a night in Ivy Morris's house — his first and only trip to Earth before now, though he had scarcely experienced the world then. That night it had been a song that pulled Cara and her grandmother from the prison. The Prince shook his mane angrily. He couldn't sing! Besides, it had taken not only the song but

also the ring that M’Gama had given Cara to make the connection that allowed their escape.

He studied the woman again. Though she lay as if dead, he realized at last that she did indeed breathe. It was slow and shallow, and you could only notice it if you watched long enough. But there was no doubt of it once he saw it.

Well, there was one more thing he could try. Perhaps a healing would work. He hesitated. He was still weak from his own wounds, and attempting this would further drain his energy. Maybe he should rest first and try the healing later.

He shook his head in irritation. Things were moving too fast, there was too much happening for him to wait.

Taking a deep breath, Lightfoot placed the tip of his horn against Martha Hunter’s chest. Pushing forward, he pierced the fabric of her gown, then her flesh.

The Prince expected the jolt — a healing always drained him of power. What he did not expect was the power of it, the horrifying feeling that a giant hand had grabbed his sides and was squeezing them, forcing out not only all the air in his body, but all the energy as well.

He pulled his horn free and staggered back. He managed only a few steps before he collapsed onto his side and the world went black once more.

# 11

# Razka and Gratz

***Luster: The Wilderness***

Gratz the delver felt a surge of relief when he spotted his cousin Razka. He, Gratz, was the youngest of their cove, and he had feared it might have been a deep foolishness on his part to respond to their nameless cousin’s call. So it was good to know he was not the only one who was answering.

He waved his spear in greeting.

Gratz had traveled from a considerable distance to answer the call. It would have taken him longer but he had slipped underground shortly after he started and used several transit points to speed him on his way. Now he was above ground again, which he disliked intensely — especially because it was morning and growing uncomfortably bright. Any sensible delver would have sought shelter from the horrid sun long before now.

“We’d best hurry,” he called when Razka, who was climbing the rocky slope below him, was close enough to

hear.

“I’ve been hurrying since I felt the call — and hurrying even more since I felt it begin to weaken,” snapped Razka. “I just hope we’re not too late. After all the trouble that nameless idiot has caused, I want him alive so I can throttle him myself.”

A moment later the two delvers scrambled into the cave. Their eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness — such a relief after that hideous morning brilliance! Even so, it was not easy to find their cousin.

It was Gratz who finally spotted him, and then only because he noticed the array of stones on the cave floor. Looking beyond them, squinting, he made out the form of the one he was no longer allowed to call by name — who, in truth, had no name. The delver still sat cross-legged, as was proper for cousin-calling. But he was as gray as the rocks around him. Worse, his skin was starting to crack.

“Razka!” screeched Gratz. “Come here!”

Razka hurried over and stood next to Gratz, who was trembling. The two delvers stared at their cousin for a long time before Razka said, “He must have wanted us to come very badly.”

“Do you think it’s too late to call him back?” asked Gratz.

“That depends on how soon the others arrive. We’ll need a full *kurtzen* to pull him out of this.”

“Do you really think another six of us will show up?” asked Gratz.

“We only need five. That will make seven of us plus . . .” Razka fumbled for a word, and finally said, “plus him. That will be enough, since bringing our cousin back will complete the *kurtzen*. That’s a powerful magic.”

“So,” mused Gratz, “the question is, do we have five cousins as foolish as we are?”

“Hard to say.”

“Well, even if we don’t, the sooner we start, the better our chances of saving him.”

“I don’t know if we should,” said Razka, his voice soft, frightened.

“Why not?”

“Because, you fool, we can’t call him back without using his *name!”*

Gratz frowned. The King had stripped their cousin of his name as retribution for his treason. This was the greatest punishment possible for a delver — in fact, it meant the nameless one was not really a delver anymore at all, since he had been set outside civilized society. Using his name to call him back from the Stone would mean they, too, had become traitors. “What do we do?” he asked, wringing his knobby hands in despair.

Razka sighed. “I don’t know.” He noticed that his legs were trembling and decided to sit. He stared at their

nameless cousin. How far into the Stone had he gone? If he was too deep already then even if they did attempt this wicked deed it would be for nothing. He could not return, and they would have marked themselves as outcasts for no good reason. He heard Gratz sniffling and snapped, “Stop that!”

“Sorry. I was just remembering how Nedz . . . how our cousin taught me to play ‘ponds and pebbles’ when we were little. He was always good to me.”

Razka smacked him on the back of the leg. “This is no time for sentiment. Do you understand what it will mean if we try to call him back?”

“Yes. It will mean we are no longer delvers. But is that a good enough reason to let our cousin return to the Stone so young?”

Razka shook his head. “It’s not just that, Gratz. Think of all the trouble he has caused. He truly is mad. If we do manage to call him back, who knows what terrible thing he might do next?”

“He is our cousin,” said Gratz stubbornly. “Our tie to him is stronger than our tie to the King.”

Razka turned toward the cousin under discussion and murmured, “If he is stone, he will cause no more trouble.”

Gratz, hearing the note of uncertainty in Razka’s voice, sank to a cross-legged position on the floor. He picked up the stone that had been designated with his own name.

Closing his eyes, hoping desperately that Razka would join him, and even more desperately that the others would arrive in time, the young delver did the most dangerous thing he had ever done in his life.

He thought his cousin’s name.

# 12

# On the Wings of a Gryphon

***Luster: Autumngrove***

Alma Leonetti came to bring Cara some food for the journey — some bread, some cheese, and some dried fruit. “It will speed your way if you don't have to stop to forage for your meals,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Cara as she accepted the food. Looking at it, she paused, then asked, “Where does this come from, anyway?”

The old woman smiled. “As you know, we have a scattering of humans here in Luster. We do for each other what we can.”

“But to make cheese, you have to have milk . . .”

“Humans aren’t the only ones who occasionally stumble through one of the gates, Cara. Goats, in particular, seem to adapt well to this world.”

Cara laughed and placed the food in her pack. She was about to call for Medafil when she heard a whicker at the

edge of the clearing, followed by a deep voice asking, “May I enter?”

“Of course, Moonheart,” she replied, though she dreaded what Lightfoot’s cranky uncle might have to say. With a start, she remembered that he was not merely Lightfoot’s uncle, he was actually her own great-uncle!

Though she anticipated some stern words of advice, Moonheart simply stepped close to her and said, “There will not be a big farewell today, Cara. So I come on behalf of the council to offer formal thanks for what you are about to do.”

Pleased, she nodded and said, “You know I am glad to help.”

She expected Moonheart to give her the ritual words of parting and then leave. So she was surprised when he said, “I know you think I am hard on Lightfoot, Cara. And I suppose I am. But it is only because I want him to achieve his true potential. Though you may not believe it, I am as worried about him as you are. May the Powers Bright keep him safe.”

“May the Powers Bright keep him safe,” replied Cara, speaking with all her heart.

Moonheart leaned closer. “Travel safe, travel well. May those who have gone before be always with you.”

Then, without another word, he turned and left the clearing.

“There’s more to that one than you might think,” said Alma Leonetti. She looked down for a moment, then raised her head and locked eyes with Cara. “These are dangerous times, child, the worst I have seen in my hundreds of years here. It pains me that we are sending you off on such a mission. But it is going to take everything we have to survive this invasion, and what you are attempting now is vital. I hope to see you again in better days.”

Then she, too, repeated the ritual words of farewell. Wrapping her mist-gray cloak around her, she left the clearing.

Minutes later, with the Squijum bounding along beside her, Cara joined Medafil. Fallen leaves rustled silver and blue around their feet as they walked to the edge of Autumngrove. Cara found the rich smell — earthy, slightly spicy — oddly comforting.

Once they were clear of the trees, Cara climbed onto the gryphon’s back, the Squijum clinging to her shoulder as she did. Medafil spread his wings and began to run. A moment later he took a great leap. Great wings beating against the cool air, he carried them into the sky, on their way to visit a dragon.

# 13

# The Sleeper Wakes

***Earth: Castle Blood***

When Lightfoot woke his body ached, and he was so weak he could scarcely move. He recognized the symptoms as those which always came with a healing. But he had never before experienced them with such fierce power. Lifting his head a few inches from the floor, which was all he could manage at the moment, he saw that Martha was also awake. So the healing — he assumed it had been a healing — had worked.

She was staring at him with a frightened look.

*Of course,* thought Lightfoot. *If she has spent time with Beloved, she must believe I am a ferocious monster, bent on killing her. I should have thought of that!*

Though what he would have done differently if he *had* thought of it he couldn't have said.

*What do I do now? If I could just communicate with her, explain to her . . .*

He didn’t dare try to touch her, since she would almost certainly think he was attacking. Though the idea that he could attack anyone in his current condition was laughable.

She spoke. Lightfoot could only make out a few of the words, but her confusion and her concern were clear. *Come to me!* he thought desperately*. Just come to me. Put your hand on my side and we can talk.*

At least, he hoped that would be the case. The energy flow he had felt as he tried to wake her was so unlike anything he had previously experienced he wasn’t sure any of the magic had actually gone into creating the kind of connection he had with Cara.

He tried again to get to his feet, then gave up.

The sight of his struggle seemed to stir something in the woman. She rose from the bed. Lightfoot could see that, like him, her legs were weak. Even so, she managed a wobbly step forward, then another, before they buckled. She kept herself — barely — from collapsing. Lowering herself to the floor, she began to crawl. The Prince assumed her intent was to flee, to get out of the room before he could get to his own feet and attack her. So he was astonished when, instead, she crept to his side and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“Thank you!” thought Lightfoot.

She gasped and drew back, her eyes wide with the shock of hearing him in her mind.

Lightfoot longed to pull himself toward her and reestablish contact but was afraid of frightening her off. So he remained motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. After a few seconds, she reached forward again. As she did, he tried to settle his mind, so their second connection would not be too chaotic. Focusing himself, he thought as calmly as he could, “It’s all right.”

Though Martha’s eyes widened again, her return thought arrived in Lightfoot’s mind almost immediately. It was not, as the Prince had expected, some question about how they were able to communicate. Instead it was an immediate warning: “You should not be here! They will kill you.”

Despite the urgency carried on the words, Lightfoot was oddly touched. He knew questions must be exploding in the woman’s brain. Yet her first instinct was to warn him of his danger.

“Beloved and the Hunters have left,” he replied. “No one remains in the castle except you and me.”

As if released by this answer, now her questions did come tumbling out. “Where have they gone? Who are you? How did you wake me? Do you know how long I have been asleep? Why are you here in this horrible place?”

In spite of their predicament the Prince could not help but laugh. “I can tell you’re Cara’s mother! She’s the only other person I’ve met who can ask questions that fast.”

“I’m sorry. I’m very confused, and frightened, and —” Martha broke off the thought and stared at him in astonishment. “You’ve met my daughter? Wait! Yes — yes, you have! I can tell.”

It was Lightfoot’s turn to be astonished. “What do you mean, you can tell?”

Martha furrowed her brow. “I don’t know, exactly. It’s just that I can somehow sense her in you.” She shook her head impatiently. “The why doesn’t matter now. Have you really met her?”

“I have indeed. Met her, and healed her, and bonded with her, and been through many adventures with her.”

“Adventures? She’s just a little girl.”

“Not that little,” replied Lightfoot evasively.

“My god! How long have I been sleeping here? How much of my life has Beloved stolen?”

For this, of course, the Prince had no answer.

“Where is Cara now?” thought Martha fiercely. “Where is my daughter?”

Lightfoot tried to clamp down on his last sight of Cara, the image of her being carried into the forest by delvers. But the memory must have escaped his control, for the woman gasped in horror and pulled away, trembling and wide-eyed. Words tumbled from her lips. Lightfoot could pick out a few of them, but they were mostly a babble of meaningless sound. Finally he lurched forward, placed a

hoof against her leg, and thought sharply, “I cannot understand you when you speak out loud! We must be in contact, and you must *think* your message to me.”

The woman took a few gasping breaths, then thought, “But that *can’t* be Cara!”

“It was.”

“No, no! She’s too old! Cara is only . . .”

Taking a deep breath, Lightfoot thought, “She told me during our last journey that her birthday had passed, and she was now twelve years old.”

Martha Hunter’s cry of grief pierced the Prince’s heart. *“Twelve?* Oh god, oh god . . .”

Lightfoot had no idea how to deal with the pain and loss that marked the woman’s face. They were far past anything he could heal with his horn.

“My little girl,” moaned Martha, curling into a ball and starting to sob. “My little girl!” Then, in a transition so swift it baffled the unicorn, she sat up and cried, “But she’s in terrible danger!”

Lightfoot, who had had to keep shifting his own position to remain in contact with her, replied ruefully, “I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to show you that.”

“And why not? She’s my daughter, isn’t she?”

“I didn’t intend to show you because there is nothing we can do right now. Also, I thought you would have too many

other things on your mind, having just been woken this way.”

“But she’s my daughter! And she’s in danger! What were those creatures? How long ago was this? What will they do to her? How can we get to her?”

Because of their connection he received not only Martha’s questions, but also a sense of her terror and anguish, and beneath that, of the deep love she had for Cara. Which made his answer all the more difficult. “I do not know how long ago it happened. I’ve lost track of the time. I will confess that I am dreadfully worried about Cara myself. But I will also tell you this: She is brave and strong — probably braver and stronger than you can imagine — and she has already survived things I would not have thought possible. Though I am concerned, I also have great faith in her.”

“But what were those . . . creatures?”

“Delvers. They are enemies of the unicorns. Even so, I have hope they will not harm her.”

“Why?” Martha asked eagerly.

“I believe their king is working with Beloved and that it was at *her* urging that the delvers were seeking Cara. If so, the delvers will want to deliver her to Beloved safe and sound. There is danger in that possibility, too, of course. But not of the same kind.”

“Beloved,” murmured Martha. She turned away from Lightfoot. When she finally turned back and placed a hand on his side, her face was red and stained with tears. It was also set with a fierce determination. “How can I get to Cara?” she asked. Before he could answer, she cried, “Wait! Wait!”

“What is it?” asked the Prince, alarmed by the look on her face.

“I just remembered — right before you woke me I was talking to Ian!”

This time it was Lightfoot’s turn to flinch away. Martha’s thoughts of her husband carried with them such a welter of emotions — anger and desire and fear and longing and loss and love all roiling together — that simply receiving them made his heart ache and his head pound.

She leaned forward, not willing to let him sever the connection. “I saw Ian,” she repeated, and now the feeling that flowed most strongly on her words was confusion.

“I don’t understand. Where did you see him?”

“He was in that horrible red place Beloved sent me to. But how can that be?”

Lightfoot was relieved to have a question he could answer with some certainty: “Your husband is a Hunter, is he not? The last time I saw him, he was about to set out on a hunt to find you. So it does not surprise me that he made it into the Rainbow Prison. He’s a very determined man.”

“You’ve met Ian? I’m amazed he didn’t kill you!”

“Your husband has left the service of Beloved.”

Martha let out a little sob as she thought to Lightfoot, “Has he truly?”

“Yes. And now, in return for that good news, may I please ask a question?”

Martha gave a tiny, rueful laugh. “Ian always said that my questions carried me away. All right, I do have more questions, urgent ones. But you certainly have one coming.”

“After you woke, why did you touch me instead of running away? Surely, if you know Beloved, you must have been told I would be a fierce, ravening beast.”

Her reply burned with anger, though it was not directed at him. “That’s simple. Because I know Beloved, I know enough not to believe a single thing she has said. If she told me the sun rose in the east this morning I would have to check for myself to be sure.”

“Ah, I understand. And why —”

“Later!” thought Martha fiercely, cutting him off. “Ian is trapped in that horrible place and I have to get him out!”

She put her head in her hands. Lightfoot moved one leg so they would remain in contact.

“It’s all foggy,” she thought to him, “but I’m starting to remember. Yes! He had someone with him — a boy. The boy

was ill. Dying, I think." A new urgency filled her thoughts. "But what was it Ian told me to do?"

She was silent for a time, but Lightfoot could sense the fierceness of her concentration and knew at once when the answer came to her.

"I remember! He told me I had to come back here and look for a scarlet gem! He had a gem, too. It was supposed to send me back, but it didn't and we thought I was still trapped." She shook her head. "If the ruby didn't work, how *did* I get back here?"

*"I* brought you back, when I tried to wake you."

"You tried to wake me?" she asked, puzzled.

"With my horn. I tried first by making noise. When you didn't stir, I decided you must be trapped in some magical sleep. So I pierced your chest with my horn, thinking I might be able to break the spell."

Martha cried out, and the fingers of one hand fluttered to her breast.

"The spot where I pierced you healed instantly," thought Lightfoot, trying to sound reassuring. "But that piercing is what woke you. It's also the reason we can speak to each other. The horn makes a connection."

Martha nodded, looking dazed. "I wonder why Ian's ruby didn't work. I suppose it could have been because of Beloved's extra spell."

It was Lightfoot's turn to be puzzled. "Extra spell?"

“She didn’t simply put me in the Rainbow Prison. She used another spell to lock me in a kind of endless sleep while I was there.” Martha shuddered at the memory, then pushed herself to her feet. Lightfoot could see she was growing stronger, as if full use of her body was returning.

If only his own energy would come back that quickly! She glanced around, muttering to herself and causing Lightfoot to wish, yet again, that he had paid more attention to Cara’s human speech. But it was so much easier to communicate mind-to-mind, and he had not anticipated the need to talk to yet another human — much less Cara’s own mother.

Then another question rose in his mind. How much did Martha actually know of her own family? It didn't seem like something Beloved would have told her. And if she didn't know, who *should* be the one to tell her? He didn't relish the idea of doing it himself.

He realized that Martha had begun searching the room. She appeared to be growing increasingly frantic. Lightfoot tried to rise, as if he might help, but was still too weak from the healing. So he watched from the floor as she wrenched open drawers and pawed through their contents. Finding nothing, she stripped the sheets from the bed, then overturned the mattress. The Prince was astonished by the fury and determination on her face as she threw the pillows to the floor then pounded each with her hands, clearly

feeling for a hard lump that would reveal a hidden gem. Finally she growled and bolted from the room.

Lightfoot was not sure how much time had passed when he heard a cry of delight from somewhere above. A moment later Martha rushed back into the room. Standing before him, she opened her hand to reveal a great scarlet jewel. She said something Lightfoot couldn't understand, then held the ruby so that it caught the morning sun pouring through the window. The stone blazed with crimson fire.

Lightfoot whickered to get Martha's attention.

She moved to his side, knelt, touched him. "What is it?"

"Cara had a stone almost identical to that one. It came from Grimwold."

"Grimwold?"

"The Chronicle Keeper of Luster. He gave Cara a similar jewel to use in bargaining with a dragon —"

"A *dragon?"*

The horror he sensed in her response made Lightfoot flinch.

"She handled herself well," he replied reassuringly. "But the jewel itself became a problem for her."

"Why?"

"Because she saw you in it — saw you in the Rainbow Prison, though she didn't know, then, that was the name of the place."

Martha’s eyes widened. “I remember that! I sensed her — called out to her. But I thought it was only a dream. Besides, she was too old to be Cara. At least, that was what I thought.” She choked back another sob.

“It really happened,” thought Lightfoot. “Because the gem was her only connection to you, she didn’t feel she could give it up. Happily, it turned out that the dragon wanted something else.”

“Where is that jewel now?”

“You saw it in the Rainbow Prison. Cara gave it to her father, to use in his quest to find and free you.”

Martha barely seemed to notice his response. Her face set and grim, she stared at the jewel, as if willing it to give her the answer. She stared and stared, then smiled as a scarlet light began to shine into her face.

With a nod of approval, she began to sing.

# 14

# The Encampment

***Luster: Near the Axis Mundi***

Beloved’s moon-white hair lifted and flowed about her shoulders as if it were a living thing. Looking across the growing village of tents, carefully arranged in neat lines, she said, “You have done well, Kenneth.”

The muscular Hunter standing beside her, a tall man with reddish-gold hair smiled. “Thank you, Grandmother Beloved. You know I live to serve you.”

The two stood at the edge of a wide field about half a mile southwest of the Axis Mundi. Beloved had sent out several of her Hunters to locate a good spot for their base of operations. Kenneth, one of her favorites, had been first to return, and she was well pleased with the place to which he had led her. Not only was the field large enough for their needs, it had a clear river, some fifty yards in width, running alongside it — protection and a good water source, all in one.

She decided Kenneth would receive a special reward when all this was over. Before she could say that she gasped, her approving thoughts interrupted by a fierce throb of pain in her chest — the eternal reminder of the ever-wounding, ever-healing piece of unicorn horn embedded there.

Though she controlled her face, Kenneth knew what that gasp meant. Beloved was never without pain, pain that rose and fell in intensity, sometimes cresting to a level that left her, briefly, speechless. He waited for the spasm to pass before saying, “We easily have room for all the tents.”

“True. But we won’t be using them much. I want most of the men out on the Hunt at all times. We have a lot to learn about this place, and I don’t intend to spend years on the task. I want the slaughter of the unicorns to begin as quickly as possible.”

"Not to mention the finding of Ian's daughter," said Kenneth, assuming Beloved's desire to capture Cara had to do with punishing Ian for his desertion. He did not speak of his personal grudge against Ian for having eluded him on his journey through the Himalayas.

"Yes, I want the girl," agreed Beloved, willing to let her trusted

lieutenant believe it was merely for revenge that she wanted to capture Cara. She did not wish to speak of the

strange prophecy the Whisperer had given her so long ago. "Now, please see to having my pavilion set up. I want to use it soon."

“As you wish, Grandmother Beloved.”\She shook a hand to indicate he was dismissed. Kenneth bowed, then quickly departed.

No sooner was he gone than — seemingly from nowhere — a voice whispered sweetly, “Is it not good?”

“It is everything you promised,” Beloved replied, feeling a rare moment of peace. She made a quick turn, as if hoping to catch a glimpse of her unseen visitor. As always, she saw nothing. “I have been waiting for you,” she said plaintively. “Where have you been since we came through?”

“Doing my work,” whispered the voice, so casually she could almost hear a shrug. “And you? What have you accomplished in this time?”

“I have sent four hundred men out on their first Hunt in Luster. Most of them are after unicorns, of course. But I gave five teams, of twenty men each, tracing packets. The packets are seeded with my own blood, which the child shares. With the spells they carry, the packets should lead my men to her quite efficiently.”

“Excellent,” purred the voice. “And what of the unicorn who fled through the tree?”

“I have another twenty men waiting to go after him the moment it is safe to return to Earth.”

“Very good.”

“The men now out on the Hunt are charged with making notes of what they find. We have a great deal to learn if we are to track down every last one of the beasts. It is going to be wonderful, though, to finally —” Beloved stopped, flinching at another stabbing pain in her heart. When it passed, she picked up where she had left off. “To finally, after all these centuries, bring this to a close. Even now I can almost smell the blood.”

She paused, as if waiting for an answer. When none came, she said, “It does help to know that this is a fairly small world.” Then, almost pleading, she added, “Can you not explain the place to me more thoroughly?”

“Is it not sufficient that I have helped you to come here?” asked the voice, suddenly sharp. “That I am with you even now?”

Beloved flinched, not from pain this time. “I do not wish to seem ungrateful.”

“Nor do you,” replied the Whisperer smoothly, gently. “Just overly curious.”

“I am sorry. I seek only to know the things that will help accomplish our mission.”

Again no answer came, but this time she knew the voice was gone. She could tell not from the silence but from a kind of emptiness in the air. With a sigh, Beloved turned her attention to the matters at hand. She was pleased to

see her pavilion — a red and gold tent considerably larger than the others — rising at the center of the field.

She paused to wait for the next surge of pain to pass, then went to where Kenneth and the other men were working.

“We will have your furnishings in place before the hour is out, Grandmother Beloved,” said one of them.

“Good. I especially want my clock, so I can see when it is safe to send some men back to the castle.”

“I envy them,” said another of the men who was working on the tent. “That unicorn who went through will be an easy catch.”

Beloved whirled on him. “Never underestimate them!” she snapped. “Never! They’re brutal and vicious.”

Chastened, blushing, the man returned to his work.

Beloved nodded her approval to Kenneth and walked on, heading for the river. When she reached its banks and was able to gaze on the clear water, she thought, as she had so many times before, *Where did this place come from?*

It was a mystery she had contemplated ever since the unicorns fled from Earth, removing themselves from her grasp.

As she stood there, a tremor shook the ground, causing the river to surge over its banks. Water sloshed against her feet. Beloved found herself wishing the Whisperer were still

close at hand. She wanted to ask what was happening to Luster now that she had finally managed to enter it.

# 15

# “The Heart That Stays True

***The Rainbow Prison***

Still clutching the ruby, Ian crouched in front of the hollow tree, staring into it as if he could somehow will Martha’s return.

He didn’t truly want that; he wanted her free of this scarlet prison. But he didn’t know if she had really escaped, or if Beloved had somehow discovered their attempted “jailbreak” and managed to intervene. The possibility terrified him.

Felicity stood nearby, watching him as hungrily as he watched the tree.

The minutes crawled on. He had no way to check the time; in truth, for him time seemed to have stopped. So he had no idea how much of it had passed before Fallon, who was standing somewhere behind him, whispered, “Ian! Listen!”

He strained, not understanding at first. Then he caught it. Coming from the hollow trunk, faint but growing steadily louder, were the words of a long-loved song, sung by a long-loved, long-lost voice:

*I looked far and wide*
*For a heart to stay true,*
*I found it at last*
*When at last I found you.*

Ian leaped to his feet and shouted, “Fallon, put a hand on my shoulder. Quickly! This may be it. We’ll have to be touching for you and Rajiv to come with me.”

Still clutching the boy in his free arm, the big man instantly did as Ian asked.

Martha’s song continued, growing stronger and more clear. Opening his heart, setting aside his fear, Ian joined his voice — parched and rough though it was — to that of his wife:

*Though I may wander*
*In paths far from you*
*I’ll always return*
*To the heart that stays true.*

In his trembling hand, the ruby began to glow. He heard Felicity gasp as a tendril of scarlet light snaked out from the jewel. The light moved slowly at first, as if puzzled, almost hesitant. But when an answering glow appeared in the hollow trunk, the tendril of light thrust toward it.

“Hold tight, Fallon!” cried Ian.

The moment he broke from the song, the light began to falter.

“Keep singing!” urged the big man, tightening his grip on Ian’s shoulder. *“Keep singing!”*

Ian picked up the song again. As he did, they were pulled toward the tree.

“Wait!” cried Felicity, lunging for them. “Take me with you!”

But her insubstantial hands could not touch, could not grasp, could not hold. Ian, Fallon, and Rajiv whirled into the red, leaving Felicity’s wail of disappointment fading behind them.

# 16

# In Enemy Territory

***Earth: Castle Blood***

Lightfoot watched in fascination as Martha Hunter sang. Her eyes were fixed on the scarlet gem. Her voice was surprisingly pure. Though the Prince could not make out all the words, he caught enough to know that what he was hearing was a love song.

Suddenly Martha's voice was joined by another, this one distinctly male. A shiver rippled across the Prince's shoulders, for the cracked, husky voice seemed to come out of nowhere. It was oddly familiar, and a moment later Lightfoot recognized it as the voice of Ian Hunter.

Ian and Martha continued to sing, the words seeming to wind around each other like vines, a seeming that became more real when a tendril of scarlet light erupted from the gem Martha was holding. A moment later a pulsing red cloud materialized in front of her. From it came another tendril of light. The twisting rays of crimson light joined, merged, grew thicker.

As Martha’s voice grew stronger, more confident, the air in front of her began to shimmer, as it will over a bare patch of ground on a hot summer day.

A moment later Ian Hunter, still singing, stepped out of the crimson cloud. He looked weak, worn, and unkempt. Even so, his face shone with triumph.

Behind Ian came an extremely tall man, brown-skinned and with long, golden hair. His right hand gripped Ian’s shoulder. In his left arm, he clutched the limp body of a boy, as if guarding some precious treasure.

A sob from Martha drew Lightfoot’s attention in time to see her lunge forward and throw her arms around her husband. Ian, in turn, swept up his wife and held her so tightly that Lightfoot was surprised she didn’t cry out in pain. Ian croaked a few words and Lightfoot wished, yet again, that he had learned more of Cara’s human speech.

He also felt an odd twinge of jealousy for what was made possible by having arms.

Martha pressed her face to Ian’s shoulder; Lightfoot could see that she was weeping.

After a moment the tall man spoke. Though his voice was as dry and cracked as Ian’s, Lightfoot understood enough to realize that he was worried about the boy, who seemed near death.

Ian looked up, and Lightfoot easily understood his reply: “You’ll find a well in the courtyard.”

The tall man shifted the boy so he was holding him with both arms, then started for the door. He paused for just a moment, looking startled when he spotted Lightfoot, then continued out of the room and down the stairs.

The Prince struggled to his feet, with the vague idea of following. He had been far too long without water himself. However after only two steps he realized he was still too weak to negotiate the stairs and decided his main interest was in Cara's parents, who were wound in each other's arms again, as if oblivious to everything around them.

Fallon moved swiftly and silently down the winding stair of the tower. Rajiv's dry skin and shallow breathing had him deeply concerned. He had seen dehydration before — there wasn't much he hadn't seen in his time on Earth — and he knew the boy was in serious danger.

The lack of food and water in the Rainbow Prison had bothered Fallon, of course, but nowhere near as much as it had affected Ian and Rajiv. He had pretended his discomfort was worse than it really was, a habit so old he had scarcely realized he was following it.

As he wound his way down the stairs, his thoughts went back to the scene in the room above. What in the world was a unicorn doing in this place?

A moan from Rajiv returned Fallon’s thoughts to the immediate situation and he began to move faster. At the bottom of the tower a wide corridor led to another, larger, stairwell. Soon he found himself in a great hall. Though the room showed signs of recent occupancy, it was now silent and empty.

Where was everyone?

Passing through the space, Fallon realized that neither it nor the bedchambers above showed any signs of having been modernized. It was not just the lack of plumbing in the tower; he saw no electric lights, nor any sockets in the walls. He moved quickly to the great doors at the front of the room. The one on his left stood slightly ajar. He pushed it with his foot. It swung open to reveal a large courtyard. Two things immediately caught — and warred for — his attention.

The first, and by far the more spectacular, was an oval opening, a good ten feet high, that seemed to have been carved out of the rough wood of the castle gate. Gazing into it, Fallon saw a smooth-sided tunnel that, after several yards, came to a thin curtain of mist. Beyond that mist, dimly visible at the far end of the tunnel, was an open meadow bordered by a forest of silver-trunked, blue-leaved trees.

Much more disturbing was what lay on the ground between where he stood and the opening: the twisted,

blackened corpse of what had once been a man.

Forcing his eyes away from this horrible sight, he looked once more toward the tunnel. Staring into it, he felt a throb of joy. Intuition and something deeper — some heart-connection for which there was no name — informed him that the one he had sought for so long was on the other side of that opening.

He ached to plunge through it. But the boy . . .

“You’ve waited centuries,” Fallon told himself fiercely. “You can wait another day.”

So he turned his attention to the other thing he had seen: a well. After placing Rajiv gently on the paving stones beside it, Fallon drew up a bucket. The water it held was cold and clear, tempting as a spring day. Ignoring his own thirst, he dipped his hands into the bucket, then dribbled a little water on Rajiv’s parched lips.

The boy didn’t move.

Slowly, tenderly, the big man continued to drip water onto Rajiv’s mouth. When his hands were empty he plunged them into the bucket once more. This time he gently laved the boy’s face in order to cool the hot, dry skin. Then he dripped more water on the mouth.

Rajiv’s lips parted slightly, enough to utter a low moan.

Fallon let the precious water fall even more slowly, being careful not to choke the boy. Not until he saw Rajiv’s throat make a swallowing motion did he release the breath he had

barely realized he was holding. Then he lifted the bucket and drank deeply himself.

Thirst satisfied, he went to stand in front of the mysterious opening that beckoned to him so strongly.

# 17

# Confessions of a Poet

***Luster: On the Way to Dark Mountain***

If gliding and not in a hurry, Medafil could fly for several hours without resting. Given the urgency of the situation, and the fact that he was carrying a passenger, he was working much harder. Consequently, he needed to stop for a break every two hours or so.

Cara was just as glad. Though she loved flying, loved seeing the beauty of Luster as it flowed below them, clinging to the gryphon’s back with hundreds of feet of open air beneath her was exhausting, both physically and mentally.

The second time they stopped to rest, the ground trembled under their feet. An hour later, while they were flying above a range of stony hills, she heard a distant rumbling. Looking down, she cried out in horror as she saw a gap wrench open in one of the hillsides.

What was happening to Luster?

Dusk was starting to darken the sky when they made their final stop for the day, coming to rest in a small clearing a good distance northeast of Autumngrove. The Squijum nestled close to Cara's side, quiet for once even though he was not asleep, while Cara shared with him some of the nuts and dried fruit Alma Leonetti had given her. Medafil went off on his own, returning about an hour later and looking quite satisfied with himself.

"Good hunting?" Cara asked, guessing what he had been up to.

"Excellent," replied the gryphon, licking his beak. He glanced around, found a likely spot, and began tamping down some grass to make a more comfortable resting place. Cara yawned and rolled out her blanket. As she did, she said, "Medafil, there's something I've been wondering about."

"Yes?"

"Well, Luster is the world of the unicorns. But I know there are seven dragons here, and delvers, and a whole population of centaurs. And you told me yourself there are merfolk off the coasts."

"Unfortunate, but true. Fribble-brained water people are a bit too inclined to jokes for my taste. Anyway, what's your question?"

"Well, there are lots of all those other creatures. So, what about gryphons? Are you the only one?"

“Gaaah! I’d rather not talk about that.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m not offended, nud-splorkle it. I just don’t like to talk about it. If you must know, there’s a fairly large flock in the Grand Aerie, up in the mountains northwest of Autumngrove.”

“Ah. But you don’t stay with them?”

“Those savages? Can’t stand the mub-fuzzled ignoramuses. They can hardly string two words together. Besides, they, um, don’t really care that much for me, either.”

Cara sat for a moment, trying to sort through this. Finally she said, “So is that where you were raised?”

“Hmmph. You can call it that if you want. Shoving dripping gobbets of recently killed rabbit down a fledgling’s throat is not *my* idea of proper child rearing.”

“So you’re not entirely happy with your parents?”

The relationship between parents and their children was always a matter of interest to Cara.

“Well, no unhappier with them than they were with me. They never did understand me. Nor did anyone else for that matter. Not that they ever said that in so many words. They can barely talk, you know. I don’t mean just my parents, I mean the whole lot of them. Oh, they know some words, and they could talk if they wanted to, but with them it’s mostly squawks and screams, with an occasional ‘Gaaah!’

thrown in for variety. So they had no idea what to do with a poet."

"You're a poet?"

"Given what a sensitive spirit I possess, not to mention my inventive way with words, I'm surprised you hadn't realized that by now. I would have thought it was obvious."

"Of course," said Cara gently. "I should have known. So what happened?"

"Well, one morning I was sitting on a rocky crag, composing an ode to the sunrise. Which wasn't easy, since I didn't have many words yet, and the gryphon language isn't really made for poetry. Anyway, I wasn't bothering anyone, you know, just minding my own business." He shook his wings in irritation. "But apparently that's not good enough for some people. Oh, no. Three blat-fargled young toughs — one of them my own brother! — decided I needed some kind of lesson. I'm not sure what lesson they had in mind, since all they said was 'Gaaah!' along with some other inarticulate squawks. Anyway, they drove me off the crag, then kept coming at me. But — hah! — I was faster than they were, for all they liked to think they were the best at everything. Except, um, I didn't stop flying for a long time."

"How long?"

"A really long time. All day, actually. By the time it was starting to get dark, I had no idea where I was or how to

get back. Not that I really wanted to go back. A poet can only take so much of that kind of treatment."

"What happened then?"

"Well, as I said, it was starting to get dark. Given how long I had been flying, I definitely needed to rest. But just as I was about to land, I realized I was in the worst possible place."

"Why? What was wrong with it?"

*"It wasn't finished!* I had heard about spots like that, all kind of blank and misty, but I didn't think they were real."

Cara shivered. "I remember seeing them listed on the map M'Gama showed us."

"Well, they're pretty terrifying, let me tell you. You're not sure what's going to happen if you land on one! So I flew back up and went a little farther. But the next spot I tried was even worse."

"Why?"

Medafil looked from side to side, then said softly. "I had come to the Caves of the Cockatrices."

The way he said the word made Cara shiver.

# 18

# A Matter of Timing

***Earth: Castle Blood***

In the tower room, Ian Hunter pulled his wife even closer and whispered, “I’m sorry, Martha. Sorry for all of it.”

“I don’t know what to say, Ian, what to do. You’ve been gone so long —”

“Only so I could continue to search for Cara! We agreed to that, sweetheart. Neither of us had any idea that Beloved was going to . . . to do what she did to you. But now I’ve found Cara, and I’ve come for you as well.”

“Yes, you’ve come for me, but Cara is lost again!”

Ian gripped his wife’s shoulders. “What do you mean?” He felt as if he had just received a blow to the stomach.

“She’s been kidnapped by some creatures called delvers.”

Cold fear twisted Ian’s heart. “Why do you say that?”

She gestured toward Lightfoot. “He told me. Or showed me.”

Ian, whose entire attention had been on his wife from the moment he had appeared in the room, turned and saw the unicorn for the first time. “Lightfoot?” he cried in surprise.

The Prince whickered a response.

“He’s the one who broke the spell,” said Martha. She crossed to the unicorn, knelt, and put her hand on his shoulder. “That’s what pulled me out of the tree.”

Ian nodded, then said, “Listen, I have had occasion to deal with the delvers. I know they look horrifying, but I do not think they will harm Cara. More likely they are planning to deliver her to Beloved. That’s bad, but at least it should keep her safe for now.”

Martha nodded grimly. As she did, Lightfoot thought to her, “Please give my greetings to your husband.”

“How do you know him?”

“It’s a long story. Please, just greet him and ask him who the other man who came through with him is.”

Martha spoke the question aloud.

“His name is Fallon,” replied Ian. “We met while I was searching for a way into the Rainbow Prison. He . . . helped me when I had a problem.” He felt a pang in his heart as he realized he had nearly forgotten about Rajiv. “Fallon was carrying a boy with him. The boy was ill — I need to check on him.”

He hesitated, then extended his hand to Martha.

“I am not yet ready to go down the stairs,” Lightfoot thought to her. “My legs are still too weak from waking you, which took a great deal of energy. But I need water, very badly. Could you ask your husband to bring some?”

Martha repeated this information to Ian, adding, “I’ll stay with him until he is stronger.”

Ian nodded, and headed for the door.

When he entered the courtyard Ian expected to see Rajiv and Fallon together. So he was stunned to spot Rajiv’s body lying alone by the well. Terror stricken, he raced to the boy’s side. To his relief, Rajiv was still breathing.

Glancing around, Ian spotted Fallon standing in front of a large oval opening in the castle’s wooden gate. Stretching beyond the oval was a tunnel that Ian knew, with immediate certainty, led to Luster.

He called to his friend, then dropped to his knees and lifted Rajiv’s head into his lap.

Fallon trotted back to join them. “I have already given him a little water,” he said, kneeling beside Ian. “We can give him more in a few minutes. We should mix some salt with it, to help his body rebalance, but I did not want to leave him alone while I went to look for it.”

“I can find some easily enough,” said Ian. He slid Rajiv’s head from his lap, then gently lowered it to the cobbles.

“I’ll get it as soon as I have a little water myself.”

Cupping his hands, he reached into the bucket. “Not too much,” cautioned Fallon.

Ian didn’t answer; he was too busy sipping the water, which at this moment tasted better than the finest wine ever made. Sighing deeply — the relief was enormous — he stood and headed into the castle. He returned a few minutes later with the salt, as well as some cups.

“Excellent,” said Fallon. He mixed a little salt into a cup of water, then let some drip onto Rajiv’s lips, which parted hungrily in response. Fallon let just a bit more water fall into the boy’s mouth, then murmured, “Ian, that opening over there — it leads to Luster, I’m sure of it.”

“I agree.”

“The friend I seek is on the other side.”

“As is my daughter.”

Fallon smiled. “Then we can continue together for now. I’m glad, for I was not looking forward to parting from you.”

Ian was unexpectedly pleased to hear this. “Nor I from you,” he replied with genuine affection.

“We’ll need to wait until the boy recovers, of course,” said Fallon. “He should be well enough to travel tomorrow.”

Ian shifted uneasily. “I cannot wait until tomorrow.”

Fallon raised a questioning eyebrow.

Ian sighed. “My daughter has been taken prisoner. I need to rescue her, and time is important.”

“Where did this information come from?”

“I’m sure you noticed the unicorn in the tower room. He told me. Well, he told Martha. She passed the information to me. He is still exhausted from waking her. I need to take them some water.”

“Your wife can talk to unicorns?

“It's a new development. Clearly, I married into an unusual family.

Fallon, who was gazing longingly at the opening in the gate, nodded but said nothing for a moment. When he finally did speak, it was to say, “In front of the gate lies a corpse, blackened and badly contorted. I am not sure what it indicates, but I do not like it.”

Ian spotted the body, and shuddered. But all he said was, “I have to take some water to my wife.”

Ian carried a bucket of water, along with an empty cup for Martha to use, up the tower steps. Halfway to the top he lost his sight, and nearly his footing. He stood in silence, unwilling to call out; he had not yet told his wife of the price he had paid to find his way to her side. Hoping the Blind Man would not need his vision for too long, he settled cautiously on the steps to wait. After what seemed hours,

but was in reality only about twenty minutes, his vision returned and he got to his feet to resume his climb.

Martha was still sitting next to Lightfoot. From the way her hand rested on the unicorn's shoulder, Ian was sure they were talking mind-to-mind, just as Cara had done with the Prince.

Silently, he set the bucket on the floor beside Martha.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm parched, too, but didn't know if I could stay awake much longer. Lightfoot says that is to be expected — that I'll need to rest awhile to recover both from the healing and my time under Beloved's spell."

He could hear the frustration in her voice and knew she wanted to start their search for Cara instantly.

"Rest will be good," he said gently. "I'll wait for you in the courtyard."

Ian and Fallon took advantage of the time that the others slept to plunder the castle stores. Despite their ravenous hunger, they knew better than to gorge themselves after nearly starving in the Rainbow Prison, and so snacked frugally on some cheese and dried fruit. Then Ian set to work preparing a light meal, using lentils and some salted fish, while Fallon went to keep watch by Rajiv's side.

Ian carried the meal outside when it was ready, and the two men ate in companionable silence. When they were

finished Ian said, “We should take advantage of being here to get weapons and fresh clothing. Well, weapons at least. I’m not sure there are any clothes here that will fit you!”

Fallon laughed. “I’ll wash up a bit while you’re gathering things.”

Beloved’s armory was well stocked, and Ian made a number of trips, carrying out a variety of blades, from which he hoped to find ones would suit not only Fallon and himself, but Martha and Rajiv as well.

That done, he shifted his attention to the matter of clothing, returning after a time with his arms loaded with fresh garments not only for himself, but for Martha and Rajiv. When Fallon expressed wonder that the castle contained such an array of clothing, he explained about the Maidens of the Hunt. “Also, new Hunters are sometimes recruited at a very young age, particularly if a young man of the right bloodline becomes orphaned.”

Fallon looked troubled, but said only, “This Beloved has quite an operation.”

Ian nodded grimly. “She has used her centuries of life to gather money, power, and arcane knowledge. Leaving the Hunt, knowing that she would see it as a betrayal that must be punished, was one of the most frightening things I’ve ever done.”

Dusk was falling as Martha and Lightfoot entered the courtyard. The Prince appeared a bit wobbly, but otherwise seemed fine.

After Ian had introduced Fallon to Martha, and explained who Rajiv was, she pointed to the gate-within-the-gate and said, “What’s that?”

“Our entry to Luster,” replied Ian.

“You shouldn’t have let me sleep. Let’s go!”

“Rajiv is not ready to travel yet, Mrs. Hunter,” said Fallon. “I am hoping he will be well enough by morning. Children recover from dehydration quickly.”

“We can’t wait until tomorrow,” said Martha. “We have to go after Cara right now! Tell them, Lightfoot.”

The unicorn looked at her in puzzlement. She sighed, then placed a hand on his shoulder and thought: “They want to wait until tomorrow to go through that gate. I can’t wait, I want to go look for Cara right now. Will you come with me?”

The Prince hesitated, then replied, “I need to show you something.”

Puzzled, keeping one hand on Lightfoot’s shoulder, Martha let him lead her toward the gateway.

Ian rose to join them.

A few feet from the gate, Lightfoot stopped in front of a blackened form, so grotesquely twisted that only by studying it carefully — which was hard to do, since it was

sickening to see — could you tell it had once been a man. Martha cried out in disgust.

“That is what happens to anyone who passes back through the gate too soon after having first gone through it,” explained Lightfoot. “I heard Beloved say it, and a short time later this poor fool proved it when he chased me here. The problem is, I don’t know the human language that well and so don’t know how long I must wait. For that matter, I have no idea how long I’ve been here, since I fell unconscious from my wounds when I first arrived and again after I woke you.”

Martha stared at the misshapen body, her horror shifting to mounting frustration. She could not ask her new friend to risk such a fate. She was tempted to make the journey on her own, to plunge through the gate right this moment. But without a guide how could she find her daughter in the vastness of a world she had never seen before? Despair, which she had been trying to hold at bay, overcame her. She staggered for a moment, and Ian caught her. “What is it?” he asked.

Fighting off horrid imaginings of what the delvers might have done to Cara — might be doing even now — she whispered, “We can’t go yet.”

“Why not?”

She pointed to the grisly remains of the Hunter and explained, ending with, “I’d go alone, if I had to. But it

doesn’t make any sense to go to Luster without Lightfoot.” She paused, and her chin began to tremble. “How will we ever know when it is safe?”

“Oh, we’ll know,” said Ian unhappily. He gestured to the Prince. “I didn’t realize Beloved was aware Lightfoot had come through the gate, much less that she had watched him do so. Now that I do know, I can guarantee you this: The moment it is safe, she’ll be sending Hunters back to kill him.”

# 19

# Whispered Temptations

***Luster: The Wilderness***

When Belle left the Valley of the Centaurs, her intent had been to return to Autumngrove as quickly as possible. The unicorn didn’t mind traveling alone; actually, she welcomed the solitude, since it gave her time to think. And she had a great deal she needed to think about.

First was the matter of the centaurs, who had turned out to be friendlier than she had anticipated. Even more interesting — from her point of view — they clearly had a strong warrior code, something her fellow unicorns sorely lacked. She would have loved to remain with them and watch the trial-by-combat that would determine their next king, who they referred to as their “Chiron.” Princess Arianna and the warrior Arkon had invited her to do so. Belle had been tempted, and even had good reason, since the naming of a new Chiron would be useful information to carry back to Autumngrove. But things were moving too fast for her to dally, and she had felt she must decline.

The second and far greater matter of confusion was the story the old Chiron had told them about the birth of the Whisperer. Could the ancestral unicorns really have been so foolish as to perform that Purification Ceremony he had described? Had they really tried to become *perfect?*

Belle shuddered at the thought.

Even more troubling was the Chiron's claim that their own worst instincts, pulled from them in that misbegotten spell-casting, had congealed into a strange being called "the Whisperer," who was now their most terrible enemy, more dangerous even than Beloved.

Equally bizarre was his claim that the Whisperer had subverted a band of dwarves and turned them into the delvers. According to the Chiron, since the Whisperer was — however unintended — a creation of the unicorns, this explained why the unicorns and the delvers were forever locked in conflict.

Belle had been pondering all this as she made her way back toward Autumngrove. Then, on the night of her third day of travel, the Chiron's story was confirmed in the most horrifying way possible.

Seeming to come from nowhere and everywhere all at the same time, a voice whispered to her, "I know what you want.

Belle stopped, startled. "Where are you?" she demanded.

“Where I am doesn’t matter,” purred the voice. “What matters is that I know what you want. And I can give it to you.”

“What do I want?” she asked, her voice defiant.

“You know.”

She snorted. “Of course I know. But that doesn’t mean you do.”

The voice sighed. “Do you really want me to prove it to you? All right, there here it is: You want to be in charge, because you think the Queen is a fool who is going to get you all killed.”

Belle’s heart clenched in terror. She turned and ran.

# 20

# Rajiv

*Earth: Castle Blood*

Rajiv had been expecting to die. So when he opened his eyes and saw that he was no longer in the Rainbow Prison he was not sure, at first, if he was back on Earth or had entered the afterlife. Certainly the stars that spangled the dark sky above him were not in any pattern that he recognized. Nor had he ever seen so many of them, except during his journey into the Himalayas with the two crazy men he had convinced to let him come along on that trip.

He groaned slightly. Almost instantly, so fast it was as if he had summoned a djinn, the face of the big sahib, Fallon, appeared above him. Such an odd face! Oh, very handsome, to be sure. But his skin was as brown as if he had been Delhi-born, while his hair was of purest gold. Rajiv never tired of trying to figure out where he might have come from.

Right now the sahib’s kind eyes were filled with concern.

Rajiv tried to greet him, but found that his voice would not work. Fallon poured — oh, miracle! — a tiny amount of slightly salty water into his mouth. Rajiv swallowed. It was painful, yet pure bliss.

"Tell me, sahib," he managed to croak. "Are we dead, or just in another place?"

Fallon laughed and tousled Rajiv's hair, an affectionate gesture that the boy loved.

He saw now that the other sahib was also looking down at him. Sahib Hunter's face was filled with such profound relief that it brought tears to Rajiv's eyes. He was not used to having anyone care for him so deeply as these two men to whom he had attached himself.

"We're back on Earth, Rajiv," said Sahib Hunter gently. "And very glad to have you still with us. You had us frightened for a while."

"I had *me* frightened, sahib!" he replied, trying to grin, but not quite managing it. "More water, please?"

Again, Fallon poured a bit of water into his mouth.

*"Lots* more, sahib?"

Fallon shook his head. "Not too fast. Too much at once will make you sick."

With a sigh, the boy pushed himself to his elbows. "What is this place?" he asked, looking around. Before they could answer he cried, "The memsahib! Oh, you did it, sahibs! You brought her back with us."

Then he drew in a gasp of wonder and whispered, “But what is that next to her?”

“That is a unicorn,” said Ian.

“But it is so beautiful!”

“It — he — is supposed to be,” replied Fallon, his voice as soft as Rajiv’s.

The boy turned to him. “I want to know more. But right now, sahib, I am starving!”

Placing a hand on his forehead, Ian said, “You’ll have to be careful, Rajiv. Just as with the water, too much food too fast will make you ill.”

“Sahib, right now *any* food will do!”

As Rajiv carefully nibbled the bits of fruit and cheese the men allowed him — he had no choice but to be careful, since they handed him the morsels very slowly — the memsahib came to join them.

“We looked for you for a long time, miss,” said Rajiv. “It is nice to see you with your eyes open!”

Martha laughed and Rajiv, whose quick eyes did not miss much, noticed that her husband appeared first startled, then pleased.

“What are we to do next, sahibs?” Rajiv asked, when he had finished all the food they would give him.

“See that opening?” said Ian, pointing to the gate-within-the-gate.

“Ah, yes. More strangeness.”

“It leads to another world.”

“Are we going to go there? If so, I hope this one will have food and water!”

“It will,” said Ian. “The land is real, not made of light. I have been there before.”

“And is this where your friend is waiting, Sahib Fallon?”

“I believe so,” said Fallon.

“And my daughter,” said Ian.

“Then when shall we go?”

“There is . . . a complication,” said Fallon. Quickly, he and Ian explained the problem with Lightfoot crossing back.

“Ah. Then we shall have to watch carefully.”

“The first thing we have to do,” said Ian, “is decide how to spend the night. Since we can be sure that Beloved will be sending some men through that gate to kill Lightfoot, the question is how best to be ready for them. Should we plan to meet them head-on? Should we prepare an ambush? How can we get some rest and still be ready for them — especially since we don’t know how many men will be coming?”

“Surely it will be but one or two,” said Fallon. “He is only one unicorn, after all.”

Lightfoot, who was listening to this via his connection with Martha, whinnied his annoyance. Nodding, Fallon said, “No insult intended, Prince. But the point remains — it seems unlikely this Beloved would send through more than just a couple of men.”

“You don’t understand,” said Ian. “She will be furious that Lightfoot escaped her, and even more furious that he did it by entering her castle, which she will consider a great violation. What we don’t know is whether she recognized him. If she did, she may want to capture him alive — in which case she might send as many as twenty men. How do we prepare for that possibility?”

“Why don’t we just hide?” asked Rajiv.

Ian looked at the boy in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Sahib, fighting is what you do when you can’t do anything else,” said the boy, speaking with a wisdom born of the streets. “What *we* want to do is go through that gate. We can’t do that until we know it is safe for Lightfoot. Since we know that when some men come through it will mean that it is also safe for the Prince to return, we have no need to fight them. We simply stay out of their sight and wait for a chance to slip through the gate and go to this Luster of yours. They will not be able to follow us!”

Fallon smiled. “I knew there was a reason we brought you along, Rajiv!”

“I'll be right back,” said Ian.

“What are you going to do?” Fallon asked.

“We closed the door to the castle once we were done. I think we should leave it open, to indicate that Lightfoot had gone inside. If they go in to look for him it will give us some extra time to get to the gate.”

“Excellent thinking, sahib!”

Ian was surprised to realize how much the boy's praise pleased him.

It took several minutes for them to determine the best place to both rest and keep an eye on the gate. Ian hoisted Rajiv onto his back and carried him as they looked, partly so the boy could be included in the endeavor, but even more so that he would not be left alone in case the Hunters did arrive. It was well he opted to do this, for it was the boy’s quick eyes that found the best spot.

“Look, sahib,” he said, pointing to the platform where Beloved had stood to rally her men just before their assault on Luster. “Perhaps we can wait behind there.”

The base of the structure was about eight feet square. Solid walls on the front and sides hid the stairs by which Beloved had mounted the platform when she wished to address her Hunters. On either side of those steps was an opening wide enough so that all of them, even Lightfoot, could slip into the hollow center of the tower.

“Perfect! said Fallon.

In short order they carried the food, clothing, and weapons they had taken from the castle to their hiding place, where they could distribute and pack them. Rajiv was delighted when Ian produced the short blade they had deemed would best suit him. “Oh, sahibs,” he marveled. “I have always wanted a sword of my own!”

“May you never have to use it, said Martha.

“You never know, memsahib, it might one day save my life . . . or yours!

Once the work was properly done, Fallon said, “And now, I think we should get some rest. I’ll take the first watch, if you wish. If we include Lightfoot, we’ll only need to watch for two hours each.”

“I can watch, too!” insisted Rajiv.

“I’m certain you can,” said Fallon. “But for tonight, you sleep. There will be plenty of danger soon enough.”

Ian and Martha returned to the castle. When they came back, Martha had changed from her white gown, and was now wearing a red plaid shirt, some form-fitting jeans, and a pair of brown boots.

Fallon raised a questioning eyebrow.

“These are the clothes I was wearing when Beloved took me,” she said.

She was also carrying blankets and pillows, with which she insisted on making a comfortable resting place for Rajiv.

“Memsahib,” he protested, “I can sleep anywhere!”

“Nevertheless,” she said, “tonight you shall have a decent bed. Who knows what the morning will bring?”

“Another world, most likely,” he said contentedly. “And more adventures.”

With that, and despite his protests, Rajiv drifted off to sleep.

# 21

# “I Invented Seven New Curses on the Spot”

***Luster: On the Way to Dark Mountain***

Cara looked at Medafil with wide eyes and whispered, “What are cockatrices?”

The gryphon shook himself as if he had just had a chill. “They're these crazy two-legged critters that stand man high. Kind of dragony with their scaley bellies and snakey tails, but they have the head and legs of a rooster. Pretty stupid looking if you ask me. Actually, as near as I can make out, they *are* stupid. I mean, you could take out one of their brains and not have enough to spread on a slice of bread. You might laugh to see them, but that would be a mistake, since they are seriously deadly.”

“In what way? Do they eat people?”

“Hah! Wouldn’t be easy for them to do that. No, they're dangerous because if one of them looks you in the eye . . .”

He went silent and shuddered.

“What? cried Cara. “What happens?”

The gryphon dropped his voice. “One look and you turn to stone!”

“Yike!” muttered the Squijum, who had climbed onto Cara’s shoulder and was listening from behind her hair.

Medafil ruffled his feathers. “The only good thing about the gum-frittled beasts is that there aren’t very many of them.”

“Where did they come from?”

“Oh, who knows? One story is that the first one came from a rooster's egg that was hatched by a snake. Which of course is ridiculous, since roosters don't lay eggs. On the other hand, cockatrices shouldn't exist, so who knows? Just one of nature’s little mistakes if you ask me. Anyway, I certainly couldn’t stay there! So I flew on through the darkness, which I don’t really like to do, except for the part about seeing all the stars above me. Then . . .”

He paused. The silence stretched on for so long that Cara finally snapped, “Then *what?”*

“I don’t like to say what happened next.”

“Why not?”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Medafil, just tell me what happened.”

“I fell asleep.”

“While you were flying?!”

“Gaaah! I told you it was embarrassing! Never mind. I don’t want to talk anymore.”

And with that he tucked his head under his wing.

“Medafil?”

Silence.

“Medafil?”

Nothing.

“Medafil, please tell me the rest of the story. I was just surprised is all. I didn’t laugh, you know I didn’t laugh.”

“I am ignoring you,” said the gryphon, his voice muffled by his wing.

“But I really want to know what happened! I’m worried about you. What if you didn’t survive?”

From beneath the wing she heard a chuckle.

“If you don’t tell me what happened I’ll tickle you!”

“Gaaah! All right, I’ll tell you! But you have to promise not to make fun of me.”

“I promise.”

“All right. I woke up before I hit the ground, which was a blessing. But I had been flying fairly low, looking for a spot to land, so I didn’t have time to recover before I, did, um . . . land.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Hurt? I invented seven new curses on the spot! Then I passed out.”

Medafil was silent for quite a while after that. Cara was about to urge him to continue, when she heard him snore.

“Drat!” she said. She considered waking him and insisting that he continue the tale, but then reminded herself that he had been flying all day, while all she had had to do was hold on for dear life.

Full darkness had descended and the night was growing cold. Taking her blanket, she crawled across the clearing and snuggled against the gryphon’s side, fitting in as neatly as a kitten could have curled against its mother. Soon she heard the low rumble of a purr.

A moment later the Squijum cuddled against her, sighed, and quickly fell asleep.

Cara, however, did not sleep, at least not right away. She lay awake late into the night, jumping at the slightest sound and worrying about Lightfoot. When at last she did drift off, she slept for only a few moments before a shuddering in the ground hurtled her back to wakefulness.

“Frim-spazzit!” cried Medafil, springing to his feet.

“Hold still!” shrieked the Squijum, leaping up and down and slapping at the ground. “Hold still, you bad dirt!”

Cara couldn’t have agreed more.

# 22

# Pierce My Heart

***Earth: Castle Blood***

Partway into Ian's watch he was startled to find Lightfoot standing beside. The unicorn had approached so silently Ian had no idea he was there until he felt the warmth of the body next to him. Turning to the prince, he said, “Is something wrong?”

As he spoke the words, he wondered how much, if any, Lightfoot would actually understand. It occured to him, not for the first time since they had arrived here, that it would be a good thing if they could communicate mind-to-mind, as the Prince did with Martha and Cara. Then he wondered if the unicorns could only establish that kind of connection with female humans.

Even if Lightfoot could make a connection with him, how was he supposed to convey his desire for that connection to the prince?

Then he was struck with something else, not a thought but an unexpected fear, rising unbidden from the way he

had been indoctrinated when he first joined Beloved and the Hunters. The idea of letting the unicorn prince press the tip of his horn directly into his chest was terrifying. He knew the fear was irrational, but Beloved's indoctrination had deep roots in his mind. He drew a long breath, wondering if he could actually do this.

Lightfoot felt an intense frustration. He had decided that he needed to convey the truth about Cara and her mother to Ian, and felt that he should do it in private. And when else would he have a chance to do this if not now? But how could he get the man to understand what he wanted?

When Ian reached out a hand and placed it on Lightfoot's shoulder, the unicorn shuddered. It was one thing to travel with a Hunter, something else to be touched by one of them. What had he been thinking when he came to try to talk to him? He should turn around now, go back to where he had been resting, get some more healing time.

Then, to his astonishment, Ian moved from standing beside him to stand directly in front of him. Lightfoot's astonishment grew when Ian spread his arms, in a clear invitation for the unicorn to pierce his chest.

Cold sweat broke out on Ian's brow. He had faced countless perils since he first joined the Hunt. But he had never been as frightened at a gut level as when he spread his arms to indicate to Lightfoot that he was ready to be brought into a direct link. Part of him feared that the unicorn would be offended at this gesture from someone who had been part of the Hunt. Would he just turn and flee?

Another part of him hoped that this would indeed be Lightfoot's reaction, and he would be spared what might come next.

The unicorn turned his head slightly to the right, so that he could look Ian straight in the eyes.

Ian looked back. “Do it,” he said, struggling to keep his voice from shaking. Then, again not sure the Prince would understand his words, he curled his fingers inward, gesturing toward his heart.

Lightfoot lowered his head, stepped forward, and placed the tip of his horn against Ian's chest. Then he pushed, breaking through the man's shirt and into his flesh.

Ian gasped, and tried not to cry out at the intense pain. But it ended in only a moment, replaced by a shiver that shook his entire body.

He put his hand to his chest. No blood. Then, knowing how this was supposed to work, he moved his hand from his chest to rest it on Lightfoot's shoulder.

“Thank you for allowing me to do that,” the Prince thought to him.

Ian shivered at the strangeness of hearing the words not with his ears but in his mind. He knew, from having watched both Cara and Martha communicate with Lightfoot, that he should not answer by speaking aloud. Hoping it would work, he thought, “And my thanks to you for bringing me into this communication. I will admit that I was fairly terrified of the process. It wasn't as bad as I had feared. And I am glad to be able to talk to you. What was it that made you decide to accept my invitation? I had thought it would be a good idea, but feared you might not want to communicate with someone like me, someone who had once been part of the Hunt.”

“You are Cara's father,” replied Lightfoot. “That is enough. And there are things you need to know. Things your wife needs to know that I am not sure I should be the one to tell her.”

“Then tell me,” responded Ian, “and we can decide together.”

“A great deal has been revealed since the night that I met you in the home of Ivy Morris,” said the Prince. He hesitated, trying to decide how to reveal the truths that Ian needed to know about his wife, his daughter, and his wife's mother. Should he start with the most startling part of it, or build up to that? And what, really, was the most startling

part? Finally he took a deep breath and thought to Ian, “Ivy Morris was not what she seemed.”

“Then what was she?” responded Ian, beginning to be impatient.

“She was the daughter of Arabella Skydancer, the old queen.”

Ian yanked his hand away from Lightfoot's shoulder as if he had been burned. He stepped back, covered his face with his hands, and took several breaths to steady himself. Finally he moved forward again, placed his hand on Lightfoot's shoulder once more, and thought, “What in the world are you talking about?”

And with that, Lightfoot unfolded a story stranger and more disturbing than Ian could have imagined. He explained that Ivy's name, when born, had been Amalia Flickerfoot, and that she had a wandering spirit that became ever more worrisome, especially when she grew obsessed with Earth, and would not stop visiting there. The Prince then told of the talisman that M'Gama had created for Amalia to use as a last resort if she were ever in danger of capture by the Hunters — and how she had indeed finally been forced to use it, and as a result had been transformed into a human, with no memory of her previous life as a unicorn. He told, too, of how she had lived for decades as a human, but that after her return to Luster her aging mother had finally faded, and how M'Gama, using the

alicorn that was all that was left of the old queen, transformed Ivy back to her true shape, and that as Amalia Flickerfoot, she was now the Queen of the unicorns.

When Lightfoot was finished, Ian sank to the ground, shaking his head, trying to absorb it all.

Lightfoot gazed down at him, feeling an unexpected sense of pity.

Finally Ian reached out and placed his hand on the Prince's foreleg. “What does this mean for my wife?” he asked. “And for my daughter?”

“No one knows. No one like them has ever been born before. But I felt you needed to be told the truth, and that your wife does, too. I would have told her myself, but I do not know her well, and felt it would be better coming from you.”

He did not add that he had desperately wanted to avoid having this conversation with Martha. Even though she was a cousin, of sorts, he felt this was best left to the humans.

Ian groaned, and sank his head back into his hands. Never had he so dreaded the thought of a conversation that he knew he must have, and have soon.

# DAY TWO OF THE INVASION

It is a pity that Earth has lost its dragons, for they added immeasurably to the strangeness of our world.
This, it seemed to me, was a good thing.

—Bellenmore the Magician,
*Memoirs of a Mage (unpublished)*

# 23

# Feng Yuan

***Luster: The Wilderness***

Feng Yuan sat silently beneath a strange tree, enjoying its odd fragrance. She was not astonished to be in another world; astonishment had left her life the day the Hunter named Wu Chen had rescued her from the hillside where her father had abandoned her because the family could no longer feed a useless girl. She was five at the time and had expected to die in a few days. Given the pain that twisted both her heart and her stomach, death would have been a welcome relief. But then Wu Chen had appeared, seemingly from nowhere, to ask if she would like to go live with a woman named Beloved, who would feed, clothe, and educate her.

In return, all she had to do was help the sons of Beloved lure unicorns to their doom.

*Better doom for a unicorn than for me,* she had thought, with the cold practicality that comes from fear and hunger.

Bundled up, smuggled out of China in a small plane, Feng Yuan had found herself in an ancient castle, facing an even more ancient woman. The woman had terrified her at first — what child would not be terrified of the moon-white hair that shifted and lifted all on its own, much less the blazing red pupils of her eyes? But when Beloved had reached out a hand to stroke Feng Yuan's cheek and said in perfect Mandarin, "Welcome, child. Welcome to our great quest. I am glad to have you with us," something had melted in the girl's heart.

It was the first time in her life she had ever felt wanted.

That had happened nine years ago. Now here she was in another world. Yet the change from Earth to Luster felt no stranger than had the shift from the hills of Shannxi to the castle of Beloved. Less strange, in fact, since she had been preparing for this during all the years in between. She was educated now — fluent in five languages and wise in the ways of science and history (not only the history known to most of the human race, but much of the secret history of the magical world as well).

You never knew, according to Beloved, when such things might come in handy.

During those same years, she had also received, from Wu Chen, a second education. The man who had fetched her to Beloved's castle was enamored of the great thinker Sun Tzu and had given her a copy of his classic book *The Art of*

*War*. During her free hours he had trained her in its precepts.

She had been fascinated by Sun Tzu's clarity of thought and his wisdom, and took to murmuring his passages about the movements of troops to herself in bed at night, in order to glide herself toward sleep.

Grateful for what she had received, it bothered the girl that despite her devotion to her training, she had yet to fulfill her purpose, much less repay her benefactor — something that could be done only by calling a unicorn to its well-deserved death. This was the great purpose for which she had been educated, the reason she had been saved from death herself when she was five.

Though Feng Yuan did not look behind her, or to her sides, she knew that the four Hunters she traveled with were there, waiting, hoping for her to do her job and draw a unicorn into the clearing. It was the second day since they had entered Luster, and though this was supposed to be the world of the unicorns, there had not yet been any sign of the beasts. This did not worry her. She knew hunting could be a slow task, and she had been taught, by methods sometimes mild and sometimes cruel, to be patient.

Despite her keen awareness of the danger of her task, Feng Yuan tried not to tremble. It was not easy to stay calm; she knew the unicorns were fierce and wicked

creatures, responsible for the death of Beloved's father, not to mention the terrible pain that the woman constantly suffered. But she had learned ways to still the pounding heart, to settle the fretful mind. *I have nothing to fear,* the girl told herself repeatedly. *My Hunters will protect me.*

And if they did not? If the unicorn she hoped to attract managed to savage her before they could stop him? Well, she had already had nine more years of life than she had expected. To die for Beloved now would be small payment in return for what she had been given.

The girl's thoughts stopped, her attention caught by a movement at the far side of the clearing. She saw a flash of white among the leaves, a white so pure it made her heart ache.

Then the branches parted, and a unicorn stepped into the clearing.

Terror clutched Feng Yuan's heart. But something else stirred in her as well, something unexpected — a longing so sharp it was like being stabbed. With it came a sudden, horrified awareness of how much more there was to know about this world than she had imagined.

The unicorn walked toward her, silent, beautiful, dangerous. She wanted to run. She wanted to scream to *him* to run, to escape. But before she could unclench her throat, an arrow hissed into the clearing from the dark of

the surrounding trees and buried itself in the unicorn’s neck.

The creature, glorious in a way she had never expected, reared, bugling in astonishment and pain. His life’s blood arced out in a spurt of silver and crimson, spattering hot against the girl’s face, soaking into her hair, staining her pristine robe.

With a hideous cry of triumph, the Hunters rushed into the clearing, swords drawn, ready to slash and hack.

Feng Yuan could not watch. Filled with horror, wracked with confusion and guilt, she turned and fled.

# 24

# On the Way to Dark Mountain

***Luster: the Wilderness***

Shortly before noon of the second day of their journey Cara and Medafil came to an extended wetland.

“The Tamoran Marsh,” said Medafil. He turned his head to speak over his shoulder rather than shouting to her as he usually did while flying. “If we weren’t in such a hurry I’d go around it instead of going over.”

“Why?” called Cara.

“Bog-dappled place is filled with strange creatures. You never know what’s going to come slithering out of that murky water.”

With that he pumped his wings, shooting forward over the dismal landscape. It took nearly an hour to cross the swamp. Once clear of it, they flew on for another several minutes before Medafil called, “I’m going down to that clearing for a rest.”

But as the gryphon glided toward the opening in the trees, Cara spotted something that filled her heart with

fear. Leaning forward, she cried, “Not here, Medafil! Fly up, *fly up!”*

Without questioning her, the gryphon changed course. Beating his wings madly, he soared into the sky. When they were far enough from the clearing he turned his head and, panting from the exertion, demanded to know what was going on.

Cara’s reply was simple. “I saw a man down there. I think he was a Hunter.”

“Gaaaah! How do you know he’s not just one of the humans who live in Luster?”

“I suppose that could be. But now that Beloved has made her gateway, we can’t take any chances.”

“Gad-dingled invaders! I ought to go back and eat him!”

“Don’t! If he’s not a Hunter, that would be rude. If he is a Hunter, he’ll have a sword and maybe a bow and arrows.”

“Yike!” cried the Squijum. “Stinky Hunters!”

They flew on. About fifteen minutes later Medafil spied another opening in the forest. This time they were able to land in peace.

After they had rested for a bit and the gryphon had had time to catch his breath, Cara said, “All right, Medafil, it’s time for the rest of that story.”

“What story?”

“Medafil!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said the gryphon, gazing at her innocently.

“Last night you were telling me about fleeing from your home. But you fell asleep before you could finish.”

“Gaaah! I did no such thing!”

“Are you telling me you didn’t flee from your home?”

“No, I’m saying I didn’t fall asleep in the middle of telling a story! That’s preposterous!”

Cara bit back a sharp retort. Deciding she was more interested in hearing the end of the story than in arguing, she said, “All right, *I* fell asleep! That was terrible of me, I know. But I really want to hear the end of the story.”

“Well-l-l-l . . .” said the gryphon. He fanned out his left wing and inspected it as if he suddenly found it fascinating. After a maddening pause, he said, “Since you put it that way . . . where did we leave off?”

“You had just told me that you fell asleep while you were flying and made a crash landing.”

“Gaaah! I did *not* crash. That bum-rumpled landing was just a bit . . . ungraceful.”

“All right, you had an *ungraceful* landing. What happened next?”

“Well, at first I just lay there. I might have moaned a bit. I’m not saying I did, mind you! But I might have.”

“And then?”

“I tried to get up. Only I couldn’t. I was kind of . . . broken.”

“That’s terrible! What did you do?”

“Nothing, for a while. I told you, I couldn’t get up.”

“Well, you didn’t die there, did you?” asked Cara in exasperation.

“Gaaah! What if I had? You probably wouldn’t care, anyway!”

“Medafil, you’re not making any sense. What happened?”

“Well, I lay there for maybe two days, getting weaker and weaker. I was hungry, thirsty, wracked with pain. Really, now that I think of it, it’s a wonder I *didn’t* die! Happily, your grandmother came along before I could pass from this world forever.”

“Ah!” cried Cara. “So that’s how you met her?”

“Of course. In fact, I’ve noticed that the two of you seem to have a shared habit of finding me when I’m in trouble. Must be family destiny or something.”

“Was she a human or a unicorn when this happened?”

“Oh, I should have mentioned that, shouldn’t I? She was still a unicorn at the time. Wandering, of course, as was her way. She came to me and healed me and did that thing with her horn that let us speak mind-to-mind.”

“I didn’t know you could speak mind-to-mind with my grandmother!”

“Well, you don’t need to know everything, do you?” sniffed Medafil. “Anyway, that did more than let us speak mind-to-mind. Somehow it opened up the language in my heart. When I asked her how she found me, she said, ‘I met a woman in the wood, tall and beautiful, with skin the color of wet sand and hair as golden as the sun. Her name was Allura. She told me you were here, and suffering, and asked me to come to you. So I did.’”

Medafil paused for a bit, obviously lost in memory. “Amalia and I traveled together for the next few weeks,” he said at last. “But she was restless and eventually left me. The next time I saw her, she was in human form. I didn’t recognize her, of course. And she didn’t know me, either, because her memory was so fogged. Even so, it *felt* as if we knew each other. We had some ring-dingled good adventures together.”

“Is that why you can speak English?” asked Cara.

“Actually, I learned it before I met her again. After she had opened my heart so we could speak mind-to-mind I became hungry for words. Ravenous. But I didn’t have any way to learn until a year or so later, when I met a man called Armando de la Quintano —”

“I know Armando! I met him on the way to Ebillan’s cave. That was before I found you caught in that delver trap.”

“Gaaah! I don’t like to talk about *that* little episode, if you don’t mind! Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely

interrupted, I met Armando — which, of course, meant meeting all of those crazy people who travel with him."

"The Queen's Players," said Cara.

"Yes." Medafil made a sound of approval in his throat. "I must say, I love show people. They're quite mad, but very sweet. Anyway, I traveled with Armando and the Players for several months, taking part in their acts. That was when I perfected my English. Now come on — I need to get something to drink. Then we had better start moving again."

They made two more flights that day. As they traveled, the marshland gave way to drier terrain that sloped upward. By late afternoon Cara could see Dark Mountain rising in the distance.

As Alma Leonetti had described, it was shrouded in clouds. What the old woman had not mentioned were the constant streaks of lightning that lanced down from those clouds.

"Sizzle-splatting weather," muttered Medafil.

They flew on.

# 25

# Beyond the Mist

***Earth: Castle Blood***

It was on Martha’s watch, just before dawn, that the Hunters arrived. She was peering over the edge of the platform, fretting about how soon they could pass through the gate and begin their search for Cara when the first of the men stepped out of the tunnel. Instantly she dropped down, shook her husband’s shoulder, and whispered, “They’re here!”

Ian sat up at once, moving from sleep to full wakefulness with a speed that had been drummed into him during his training to become a Hunter. Silently, he roused Fallon, Rajiv, and Lightfoot.

It was good, he decided, that they had chosen to hide rather than plan on a fight, since Beloved had sent back twenty Hunters.

*All to catch one unicorn*, Ian thought, shaking his head.

Crouched together, scarcely daring to breathe, the little group waited until the Hunters had entered the castle. The

moment they did, Ian gave the signal.

Moving as silently as possible, they bolted for the entry to Luster. It was so wide that the five of them — Rajiv, Fallon, Ian, Martha, and Lightfoot — could walk side by side. Ian was surprised to note that the tunnel was smooth-sided, a wooden oval that extended for some twenty feet before coming to a shimmering curtain of mist.

Beyond that mist, dimly visible, was another world.

“Oh, sahibs,” murmured Rajiv. “You promised me wonders. I did not also expect miracles!”

In appearance, the world that lay ahead was not radically different from Earth. There were trees, after all, and ground and grass and sky. Even so, it was clearly someplace else, as the blue leaves and silver bark of the trees made plain.

When they reached the mist, they paused.

“Once we pass this, there is no turning back, at least not for some time,” said Fallon.

Ian nodded. “I think one of us should go ahead, to make sure there are no Hunters waiting on the other side.”

“Do you think that’s likely?” gasped Martha.

Ian shook his head. “Not really. Beloved won’t be expecting anyone to come through from this side until the right amount of time has passed. We know now, from how long it took the men to come through, that it will be at least a full day, maybe more. And she’ll want everyone out

hunting unicorns as soon as possible. Even so, it would be foolish of us to just assume it’s safe to move ahead.”

“Besides, sahib, we can't go back anyway,” said Rajiv. “Not with those men in the castle.”

“We have to move forward,” agreed Fallon. “But we need to know what we’re facing. I think I should go first, Ian. From what you’ve told me, it would go badly for you were you to be taken by the Hunters. If there do happen to be some there, I will greet them loudly, so you will be aware. I suspect it will not go well for me at that point, but I can either fight them or try to lure them away, to make it safe for you to come through. With luck, there will be none and I can just call for you to come through.”

Reluctantly, Ian agreed.

Fallon stifled a gasp as he passed through the mist, for it sent tingles skittering across his skin. Moving silently, he approached the end of the tunnel. He glanced at the tunnel walls as he walked and did not like what he saw. On the Earth side of the misty curtain, the tunnel had been smooth, and it was not clear what it was made of. On this side, the tunnel walls were made of wood, living wood that was splintered and broken, with silvery sap oozing down its sides like slow running tears.

Ten feet from the tunnel's end, he dropped to his belly and crawled forward in order to be less obvious when he peered out to check for waiting Hunters.

He inched ahead, looked out cautiously, scanned in all directions, then breathed a sigh of relief. No one in sight. He scrambled to his feet and turned to wave the others on.

Side-by-side, Ian, Martha, Lightfoot, and Rajiv hurried forward, each emitting a small cry on passing through the tingling mist. When they were all on the Luster side, Fallon moved close to Ian and murmured, "I do not like this."

"What do you mean?"

"Look around. We are inside a tree."

"That's impossible. It's too big!"

"No, it's not. Just not something you might have seen before. I tell you, trees such as this are important. They should not be damaged."

The words struck Ian as being true, if somewhat odd. But he had long ago given up expecting to understand everything his tall friend said.

They continued to the end of the tunnel. It opened onto a broad meadow where the grass grew as evenly as if it had been mown.

"Oh, my god!" cried Martha.

She had turned and was looking up at the tree.

“Sahibs,” breathed Rajiv, standing beside her and gazing up as well. “How is this possible?”

“There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” replied Fallon.

“I beg your pardon, sahib?”

“It is a quote from the play *Hamlet*, Rajiv, but I think it applies to this tree.”

“Well, it is certainly something I have never dreamt of, sahib. I did not know a tree could be so . . . so . . . enormous!”

Fallon’s response was interrupted by a tremor rippling through the ground. With a little cry, Martha staggered against Ian, who caught her in his arms. Lightfoot whinnied and reared up. Rajiv fell to his knees.

“What a greeting,” said the boy, once the ground had stilled. “We come to a new world and five minutes later there is an earthquake. Do not worry, Memsahib Hunter. As long as you are not inside, or standing in the wrong place, tremors such as these are not so bad.”

Fallon shook his head grimly.

“What is it?” asked Ian.

“I do not believe that was a mere earthquake.”

“What else would it be?”

“Look at the tree,” replied Fallon.

Ian turned to look more carefully at the tree through which they had just passed. He gaped in astonishment.

With silver bark and blue leaves — that much, at least, he was used to, from his previous trip to Luster — it was even more vast than he had realized, its circumference greater than that of the castle they had just left behind. Moreover, he felt a sense — he could not say why, but the feeling was deep and powerful — of something ancient and sacred.

"It is awesome," he said slowly.

"Awesome — and damaged," replied Fallon. "Look at the space we came through."

Ian turned his attention to the gap at the base of the tree. The opening where they had entered the tunnel on the Earth side had been a smooth oval. On this side, however, it was more like the outline of a sprouting onion. Rising from the oval base was a long, narrow crack that extended upward for well over a hundred feet.

"It appears the tree was badly damaged when Beloved forced her way through," said Fallon. "If it fails, I do not believe this world can survive."

Ian stared at his friend, stunned by this pronouncement.

Martha, who was now standing beside Lightfoot, said sharply, "What do you mean, 'This world cannot survive'?"

Fallon's face was grim. "I believe — no, I am certain — that this Luster we have just entered is not a world as you would use that term. It was *created,* is in the process of *being* created, as an experiment, or an act of pride, or of love. Perhaps all three. But it is unfinished, and I suspect

Beloved's violation of the tree through which we just passed has made it dangerously unstable."

Ian stared at Fallon. The big man was the closest thing he had had to a friend since he first dedicated his life to Beloved and the Hunt. Yet as he thought about it, he realized he still knew almost nothing about him. Finally he said, tersely, "Who are you, Fallon?"

This was a slight failure of nerve, since the question he really wanted to ask was *'What* are you?'"

The big man shook his head. "If we are lucky, there may be a time for me to answer that question. Right now, we have work to do — work, alas, that will lead us on different paths."

"Sahib! Will we not continue together?"

Fallon shook his head. "Our goals now pull us in different directions, Rajiv." Kneeling in front of the boy, he placed his huge hands on the slender shoulders and said softly, "You are solid and brave, and it has been a privilege to travel with you. You are everything I would have wished for in a son."

Rajiv's dark eyes welled with tears. But he had already done his pleading on this matter, back in the Rainbow Prison, before they even came to this strange new world. He knew no words would change the big man's mind. So he simply placed the palms of his hands together, bowed his head slightly, and whispered, *"Namaste,* Fallon."

Fallon repeated the gesture, murmuring, *“Namaste,* brave one.” Rising, he turned to Martha. “I wish you luck in your quest for your daughter, Mrs. Hunter. I am sorry I did not have a chance to get to know you better. Your husband has been an excellent companion.”

“We need your help,” said Martha, her voice desperate.

“You have the best help you could ask for,” replied Fallon firmly.

Martha nodded, but did not say more.

Fallon hesitated, then said, “Would you convey a message to the Prince for me?”

She nodded again.

“Please tell him I said it was a great pleasure to meet him. Then add this blessing: Travel safe, travel well. May those who have gone before be always with you.”

Martha placed a hand on Lightfoot’s neck. After a moment the Prince whickered in surprise.

“He wants to know where you learned that,” explained Martha.

Fallon smiled. “Tell him I am a bit of a specialist in unicorns.”

“He says you are also a bit of a mystery,” replied Martha. “Even so, he is sorry you are leaving us, and returns the blessing.”

Fallon nodded, then went to stand before Ian. He held out his hand, and Ian took it. The two men stared at each other

then — as if some signal had passed between them — dropped their hands and embraced, the embrace of strong men who have become brothers by passing together through great peril.

“I pray we shall meet again,” said Ian, his voice husky.

“I share that hope,” replied Fallon.

He gazed at them all for a moment longer, then nodded, turned, and strode away.

Ian stood with his hands on Rajiv’s shoulders, watching Fallon depart. He saw now that the great tree through which they had entered was surrounded by a wide greensward where the grass grew ankle deep, no higher. Some sixty or seventy yards away, as if holding a respectful distance, the forest began again. Though it was composed of trees that would have seemed enormous on Earth, here they were dwarfed by the great tree that grew in their center.

All too soon Fallon had disappeared into that mysterious woodland.

“I shall miss him, sahib,” murmured Rajiv.

“I shall I,” said Ian. Then he squeezed the boy’s shoulders and said, “But you know you have a place with us, right?”

“Thank you, sahib. I do know that. Even so, it is nice to be told.”

“Ian,” said Martha urgently. “We have to get started.”

Ian took a deep breath, nodded, then said fiercely, “Yes, my love. Let us find our daughter.”

# 26

# Another Dream Within Stone

***Luster: Delvharken***

The stone wizard, Namza, dreamed his second dream.

In it he relived the pain that had consumed his body when he finally woke, bruised and broken, from his fall outside Bronzeclaw's cave. Even in his stony sleep he could feel, once more, the agony that had wracked him.

As the dream continued, he began the seemingly endless crawl across stone that had taken him the rest of the way down the mountainside. He moved in terror, always fearing that the dragon's eye might once again fall upon him. The trip was taken in stages, for he would often lapse into unconsciousness, waking he had no idea how much later.

He could not find food, for nothing grew on that stony slope. Even worse, there were many stretches where there was no shelter to be found from the wicked sun that beat upon his skin and tormented his eyes. After a while he removed his loincloth and wrapped it around his head, preferring to travel naked rather than endure the blinding

rays. The precious sack of dragon stones he clutched always in one hand.

To his relief there was water; if he could not find a running stream he could at least, in the morning, lick the dew from the beloved stones.

His skin blistered. The blisters broke and oozed. And still he crawled on, hating the sun, hating the world, hating the unicorns, hating everything.

More and more often he would lapse into unconsciousness, only to begin crawling again once he woke, though what he was crawling toward, or why, he no longer remembered. Finally a dark haze overcame him, and he could crawl no more.

And then, a change. He roused to find himself not sprawled on the stone, but lying inside some sort of wooden structure. The walls seemed to be composed entirely of doors, fairly large at floor level, growing smaller and smaller as they went up. Even more startling was the realization that the structure was moving. He wanted to get to his feet, but found he was too weak to even attempt it.

He checked for his dragon stones, was relieved to find he was still holding them, then fell back into a deep sleep.

The next time he woke, he saw someone — a human! — sitting nearby. The man wore a jacket patched together

from mismatched pieces of brightly colored cloth. The jacket had numerous pockets, from each of which hung a gold chain. The man was bald as a delver, with a snub nose and eyes that radiated kindness, though Namza did not, at that time, understand what kindness was. Perched on his shoulder was a furry creature that was staring at Namza with curiosity. It chattered obnoxiously, then fell silent.

"Where am I?" growled Namza. "What am I doing here?"

He did not expect an answer, so was surprised when the human replied, in passable delvish, "I found you a few days back, lying on a patch of stone and nearly dead. My name is Thomas the Tinker, and my job is fixing things — though, alas, I am not nearly as good at fixing broken bodies as I am at mending broken pots."

"How could you have found me?" Namza had demanded.

The man raised his eyebrows and asked softly, "Why so angry?"

For this, Namza had no answer. He was a delver. Delvers were usually angry.

After a moment of silence, the man lifted his hand to stroke the creature perched on his shoulder. "My friend the Squijum here led me to you."

"And how is it that you speak delvish?" asked Namza.

"I told you, I fix things for a living. I travel here and there to do so. The more folk I can speak with, the better the chance I have of finding work."

Namza wondered why he had never heard of this strange human, then realized that any delver who had actually done business with him would be unlikely to speak of it. Delvers and humans did not mix.

Because Namza was too weak to raise much of a protest, they traveled together for the next month while he continued healing. Once he was able to go outside, Namza realized the moving structure was actually a cart, painted in ridiculously bright colors. To his surprise, he discovered that the man was able to pull the cart, which would seem to indicate that either he was far stronger than he looked or that the cart itself was enchanted.

Though Namza remained surly and suspicious, as tended to be the delver way, the human never lost patience with him. And as the weeks went on, an odd thing began to happen: Namza found his spirit growing quieter and his never-far-off anger beginning to dissipate.

“What are you doing to me, human?” he growled one night after he had climbed out of the cart, where he spent most of the daylight hours.

“What do you mean?” asked Thomas.

“I do not feel like myself anymore.”

“Do you feel better, or worse?”

Namza hesitated for a long time, then said, “Better.”

“Well, there you go! My job is to fix things. I’m just trying to do my job.”

Namza growled and stalked off into the woods. But at dawn of the next day he returned. He said nothing of his absence, just crawled into the cart to get out of the sun.

He traveled with Thomas for the remaining months of his *nakken-gar.*

Somewhat to his discomfort, he realized that he was continuing to change, slowly at first, and then — oddly — more rapidly, as if the change were somehow building upon itself. This transition was difficult, and frightening, and many times he was still surly and resentful. But more often than not, he and Thomas were pleasant together, and the days passed in a way that he would not have thought possible before meeting the Tinker.

Yet even as his heart grew more at ease, another part of him was becoming nervous and fretful. To his horror — or at least to the horror of some scared, angry part inside of him — one night he found himself showing Thomas the dragon stones he had paid so dearly to gather, then telling the story of what had happened to him.

Afterward, he berated himself fiercely. What would Metzram think of his student when he returned in such an undelvish state of mind?

The thought was so frightening his mind shut it out, ending, for a time, his dreaming.

# 27

# Thomas on a Mission

***Luster: The Northern Wastes***

That same Thomas the Tinker who Namza dreamed of was even then returning from a mission he had undertaken for the Queen a few weeks earlier. He whistled happily as he pulled his cart, which was currently expanded out to his favorite size in order to hold the successful result of his quest.

The trip had been a dangerous one, carrying him far into the mountains northwest of Autumngrove. The distance had not been great, but the gryphons who inhabited the area were territorial and not at all friendly. And then there was the terrain itself, which was some of the most rugged in all of Luster. Worst of all had been his quarry, which was dangerous in the extreme.

“I am reluctant to ask this of you, old friend,” Amalia had said, when she first made the request, “and you should feel free to say no.”

“Well, that would be graceless of me, wouldn’t it?” he had replied merrily. “Given that save for the gift of that drink from the Queen’s Pool granted to me by your mother I would have been long ago moldering in my grave, I figure I live on borrowed time, and that you unicorns were the source of the borrowing. So if you want to ask something potentially fatal of me, how can I deny you? The worst that can happen is that you get your time back!”

Thomas smiled ruefully as he remembered the moment. He had not been quite as lighthearted about the matter as he had tried to sound, since he loved his life here in Luster and very much wanted to keep on living it. On the other hand, a successful invasion and Hunt by Beloved would pretty much end that life anyway, or at least the part of it that he loved. So the risk of doing what the Queen had asked was no greater than would have been doing nothing.

“At least, I think it was no greater,” he muttered, stopping to take out one of his numerous pocket watches and check the time. “I wonder if being turned to stone is worse than dying. Hard to say, I suppose, unless you’ve experienced them both.” He returned the watch to a different pocket than the one from which he had taken it, grabbed a handkerchief from another, and wiped the sweat from his bald head.

He glanced back at his cart, hoping he had secured his cargo properly, then lifted the handles once more.

Tightening his grip, he began to pick his way down a particularly difficult slope of rock.

It had been easier coming up, when he had folded the cart down so small that it could fit into his pocket. But that wouldn’t do now. No, given what the cart now carried, that wouldn’t do at all.

# 28

# The Call Irresistible

***Luster: the Wilderness***

Belle wandered aimlessly for much of the day after the Whisperer first spoke to her, terrified that the voice would return even as she feared that it would not.

She had known fear before — she considered it a natural part of the life she led. However, what she felt now was something different, a fear not for her body, but for her deeper self, which she had thought was secret, but had clearly been seen by this strange, invisible being. Worse, what the Whisperer had found in her was something she had been trying to deny, even to herself. But it was true — she did feel she was better suited to lead the unicorns than Amalia Flickerfoot, who had been absent for many tens of years and had returned to unicorn form only weeks ago.

Yet that very feeling was anathema to the part of her that valued loyalty and honored the chain of command.

Late in the day Belle felt a strange tug at her heart. It took only a moment for her to recognize it as the call of a

maiden alone in the wood, something almost irresistible to any unicorn.

She wondered, at first, if it might be Cara. The girl shouldn’t be wandering out here now. On the other hand, it was quite possible that she and Medafil had not made it back to Autumngrove. The gryphon was a bit of a fool, after all. Anything could have happened to them.

Then she realized there was another possibility. The terrifying tremors that had begun shaking the ground had convinced her that it was likely Beloved had succeeded in opening a gateway into Luster. What if, when she came through that gate, she had brought along a group of maidens with which to entice unicorns to their deaths? The council had never even thought about that, never planned for it.

Belle cursed the council's inexperience, and even more their inability to think strategically. Then, though she was not a member of the council, she added herself to that curse. Had that wretched “Purification Ceremony” the Chiron had told Cara about really robbed the unicorns of the fire and fight required to defend themselves?

She shook her head and forced herself to return to the immediate problem. The more she considered it, the more it made sense to her that Beloved would indeed have brought bait if she was planning a last great Hunt to exterminate the unicorns.

On another hoof, it was also possible that it *was* Cara she was sensing, in which case she should go to her.

So . . . how to determine if it was safe to respond to this urgent need to go to the maiden she was sensing? With a start, Belle realized she had already begun walking in the girl's direction. The ancient call — which had been driven into the heart of all unicorns on the horrible day when Beloved's father and Whiteling fought to the death — was that hard to resist. She stopped and shook herself. *I go on my own terms, or not at all,* she thought fiercely.

But the call was so strong . . .

*No wonder this has lured so many of us to our deaths,* she thought, feeling a sudden compassion for those lost unicorns who, until this moment, she had considered weaklings and fools. It was only now, when she felt the call herself, that she understood how compelling it was.

Not far ahead Belle saw a large tree with a split trunk, its two great boles diverging about four feet above the ground. She trotted to it, then thrust her head through the place where the trunk split, making the tree itself an obstruction to going forward. She knew it was an artificial barrier, and she could back out of it at any time. But she hoped the action would give her a moment to gather her wits — and her strength.

Instead, it merely offered a different temptation a chance to present itself, for as she stood there the warm, seductive

voice she had hoped never to hear again whispered, “I know what you want.”

Forced to silence, for fear of attracting the Hunters that might well be nearby, Belle thought fiercely, *Go away!*

To her horror, for it confirmed that the voice could indeed read her thoughts, it replied, “I could go a world away, and I would still know what you want. The question is, What would you do to have it?”

*No, the question is, What would I do to be free of you?*

With that, Belle dislodged herself from the tree and ran full speed in the direction of the girl.

*Let the Hunters take me,* she thought. *I will not give in to the Whisperer!*

It took but moments for her to reach the clearing where the girl — the bait — was waiting. Belle galloped in and reared back, hooves pawing the air, braced for the first arrow to strike and ready to die fighting.

# 29

# The Lady Graumag

***Luster: The Slopes of Dark Mountain***

It was growing late when Medafil, Cara, and the Squijum reached the line of clouds that marked the edge of Graumag's territory. No sooner had they flown past that line than a jagged streak of lightning split the sky. Moments later its thunder rumbled past, so powerfully that Cara felt as if she had actually been struck.

"Maybe we had better walk from here on," she shouted to Medafil.

"Gaaaah! We don't have time for that!"

"We won't have any time at all if we get fried by lightning!"

The words had barely passed her lips when another bolt of lightning sizzled down, terrifyingly close and filling their nostrils with the pungent smell of ozone.

"Gaaaah! All right, we'll grum-doodled walk!"

Cara hated the idea of a delay as much as the gryphon did. She also disliked having to be the grown-up on the matter. But she knew they could not continue to fly through that lightning and expect to reach Graumag's cave alive. *I suppose Medafil never had a science class,* she told herself. *So I can't expect him to know how dangerous this is.*

Still, it was clear from the gryphon's attitude after he had circled down for a landing that he was glad she had talked him out of flying.

They trudged on for another two hours. As Alma Leonetti had foretold, the stony ground was bare of plant life. Cara was careful to weave a path between the numerous boulders and upthrust spars of rock, so there would almost always be something higher than them to attract the lightning strikes. Though she walked most of the time, once in a while she would ride on Medafil's back, usually with the Squijum perched on her shoulder.

During the times when she and the Squijum were walking, the little creature would often scamper off. Each time he did he would return in a few minutes muttering, "Hinky stinky no good rocky place."

"No bugs?" Cara would ask.

"Hotcha stupid place!" was all he would reply.

To Cara's relief, they did find an occasional stream where they could slake their thirst. As the evening wore on, she

pointed out that although the thunder and lightning had continued unabated they had suffered only two bouts of rain, both of them brief and fairly gentle.

“Thank goodness for small favors,” muttered Medafil.

By nightfall they were less than a third of the way up the mountainside and it was getting cold. Cara hoped they weren’t going to have to do any serious mountain climbing. It wasn’t that she was afraid to try, simply that she had neither the skill nor the equipment for a major climb.

If it came to it, they would have to fly again.

No sooner had she accepted that idea than a zigzag of brilliant white lightning, followed closely by a deafening roar of thunder, made her dread the thought.

They slept that night as they had before, the Squijum snuggled against Cara’s chest, Cara herself encircled within the giant catcurl of the gryphon. However, unlike the previous night, Medafil folded one great wing over her like a cover. It was delightfully warm, which helped make up for the hard ground. Though the constant crackle of lightning and boom of thunder made it difficult to fall asleep, a second day’s exhaustion finally came to her aid, allowing her to drift off.

She didn’t know how long she had been drowsing when a burst of warm wind woke her. She opened her eyes. At first she could see nothing. Then she noticed two glowing spots in the darkness. Without a sound, she reached behind her

to nudge Medafil. As she heard him stirring, another jagged streak of lightning forked down.

What Cara saw in its brief glare caused her to abandon silence and she hissed, “Medafil, wake up! We’ve got company.”

Cara felt the gryphon stir behind her, then heard him mutter, “What the rat-gaddled, burk-spiffled midnight nonsense —”

He broke off as another flash of lightning revealed the enormous form of a dragon crouching about twenty feet away.

The darkness returned. It didn’t matter. The image had seared itself into Cara’s brain.

When the thunder had faded to silence the dragon said, “What are you doing on my mountain?”

To Cara’s surprise, the creature’s voice was not huge and deep, as were the voices of Firethroat and Ebillan. It was smaller and somewhat feminine. Moreover, the question had been phrased in perfect English, though with a distinct Scottish accent.

Cara chose to answer in the language of the dragons, hoping that in so doing she could stave off any thoughts that Graumag — she assumed this dragon must be Graumag — might have of eating them. Drawing in the deep breath she needed for this kind of speech, she said, “I

come as messenger from Amalia Flickerfoot, Queen of the Unicorns, in search of Graumag, Lady of Dark Mountain.”

The words rose from a place low in her belly, warming as they did until they almost scorched her tongue as she uttered them.

The dragon’s eyes — all that Cara could see of her now — widened. Switching to dragonspeak, Graumag asked, “And how is it, little messenger, that you address me as if you were a wee dragon yourself? I have never heard such words pass human lips.”

“I bear the gift of tongues from Lady Firethroat. She gave it to me as boon for a service I once did her.”

“Ah. Then, as I suspected, you must be Cara Diana Hunter. Rumor of your adventures has reached me even here on Dark Mountain.”

Cara felt a shiver to think that this great creature had heard of her, and wondered what kind of gossip network existed among Luster's seven dragons. She waited for the next rumble of thunder to fade before saying, “I am indeed the one of whom you speak. I hope that what you have heard of me will dispose you to receive the Queen’s message.”

“I will listen, lass, but not out here. This mountainside is no place for a conference of consequence. Let us go to my cave.”

“Is it far?”

“Not far, but the way is steep and rugged, and not easily climbed. I will fly you there.”

“What of my friend, the gryphon, who has carried me faithfully to this place?”

“He must wait here.”

Cara turned to translate this for Medafil, who cried, “Gaaah! I can’t let you go to that monster’s cave by yourself.”

“It would not be the first time I have been alone with a dragon.”

“She will be safe,” said Graumag, speaking in English once again.

“How do I know that?” asked the gryphon.

“Is a dragon’s word not sufficient?” replied Graumag. Her voice held a dangerous tone.

Leaning close to Cara’s ear, Medafil muttered, “Grub-dumble it, I don’t want you to go with her on your own!”

“I’ll be fine,” Cara whispered back, patting his beak and speaking with more confidence than she actually felt. Though she knew very well that a dragon’s word was considered as good as gold, knowing something and staking your life on it were two different things. And there was always the possibility that Graumag would be the exception to the rule that dragons could not lie.

Squelching the thought, she stepped forward. As she did, she was startled to hear a small voice chitter, “Hotcha

stinky firenose dragon!”

She had been so focused on Graumag she had forgotten the Squijum was clinging to her neck. Reverting once more to dragonspeak, and hoping Graumag hadn’t actually heard the Squijum, she said, “Do you mind if my smaller friend accompanies me?”

Graumag nodded. “That is acceptable. Now hold still so I can pick you up.”

Bracing herself, Cara heard a flapping sound, then felt a rush of wind. As another burst of lightning erupted overhead, the girl saw Graumag beat her batlike wings and launch herself into the air. When the thunder that had followed uncomfortably close to the lightning began to diminish, Cara felt another rush of air from the darkness. With no more warning than that, Graumag grabbed her by the waist and soared into the obsidian sky.

# 30

# Ian Hunts

***Luster: The Axis Mundi***

A slight breeze was playing through the leaves of the great tree. The ground trembled again. When it was still, Rajiv said, “How do we begin, sahib? We know nothing of this world.”

“Actually, I do know a bit, Rajiv. As I told you, I’ve been here before. And Lightfoot has lived here his entire life. The first thing we need to do is find the entrance to the delver world.”

“The main entry to Delvharken is not too far from the Axis Mundi,” said Lightfoot, who was standing between Ian and Martha in order to make communication easier.

“Have you been to this place, this Delvharken?” asked Martha eagerly.

The question made Lightfoot shudder. He did not want to tell Martha that he had been heading there to try to rescue Cara from the delvers when the dragon, Master Bloodtongue, had convinced him that he must divert

toward the Dimblethum's cave. The Prince had been reluctant to change his mission, but the old dragon had made it clear that rescuing Cara would do her no good if Luster itself did not survive Beloved's attempt to enter this world. The constant shaking of the ground made Lightfoot certain that the dragon had been right. Even so, he did not savor the idea of explaining that change of plan to Cara's mother. Finally he simply said, “We prefer to stay as far from delvers as possible.”

“They’re nasty pieces of work,” agreed Ian. “But they can be bargained with. I know, because I’ve done it.”

"But how did you manage to speak to them?" asked Lightfoot.

"Beloved had given me what is called a 'speaking stone' – though how she knew the way to imbue it with the ability to speak to delvers is beyond me. That was less than a year ago, so I am counting on the spell still being active. And I'm hoping that if I can find my way into Delvharken, I will be able to ransom Cara with the pair of rubies I'm carrying."

“Possible,” replied Lightfoot, though his tone made it clear he didn’t think the idea sounded likely.

“How close are we to this entrance?” asked Ian.

“M'Gama told me once — ”

Martha interrupted. “Who is M'Gama?”

“The Geomancer of Luster.”

“And what is that?“

“She is a magic-worker whose power is linked to stone and soil, to the very world itself. I'm worried about her. When I last saw her, she was heading here to try to protect the tree. It is disturbing that she is not here now, and I fear for her safety.“

“That's not good,“ agreed Ian. “But let's go back to the question. How far is the entrance to Delvharken?“

“M'Gama said it was about a half day's walk.“

“In which direction?“ pressed Ian.

“I don't know.“

Martha groaned. Ian reached across Lightfoot’s back to take her arm. “Don’t worry, love. Simply knowing they are not halfway across the world is useful.” Then, thinking the words to Lightfoot and at the same time speaking them aloud for Martha and Rajiv, he said, “I’m going to do some tracking.”

“Tracking?” asked Lightfoot.

Ian smiled ruefully. “Do not forget, Prince — I was trained for the Great Hunt. Though I was taught for the sake of finding unicorns, I can track other things. Delvers, for example. Or my daughter.” He took a quick look around, then said, “What’s that? It doesn’t look as if it belongs here.”

He was pointing at a pile of stones not far ahead of them.

“You’re right,” said Lightfoot bitterly. “It doesn’t belong. That’s what’s left of the place where the Dimblethum

placed a wire sphere that provided a focal point for Beloved's magic just before she blasted her way through the tree."

"The Dimblethum?" asked Ian.

Lightfoot sighed. "He is . . . was! . . . a friend of mine. At least, I believed he was. Now, I do not know."

Ian went to examine the stones. Nearby was a spot where the grass had been burned to stubble. He knelt, ran his fingers over the scorched area, then shuddered. Though he was not particularly sensitive to magic, something about the blackened ground felt horrifying to him.

He stood and glanced around. Much of the surrounding grass had been trampled, presumably by Beloved's army of Hunters. Where were they now? He knew something of her plans — she had spoken of them often enough to her inner circle, of which he had once been a proud member. She would have established a camp by this time, probably not far from here. He would need to be cautious as he searched; he certainly did not want to run into a group of his "brothers" by accident.

He began a slow walk around the great tree. When the others started to follow, he glanced over his shoulder and said softly, "Stay where you are, please. I may need to do this several times. The less the ground is disturbed the better."

"As you request, sahib," said Rajiv.

Martha only nodded, then placed her hand on Lightfoot's neck to relay the message.

A moment later, Ian disappeared around the curve of the enormous trunk. He moved slowly, his eyes scanning constantly from side to side, seeking the tiniest hint that might lead him to the place where his daughter had been taken. He passed a spot where a chunk of wood stuck out from the trunk at an odd angle. He wondered what it was. His curiosity was only increased when he noticed a similar piece about halfway around the trunk.

At that moment, he realized something else quite odd: The tunnel through which they had entered Luster did not extend all the way through the trunk. That must mean that the place where Earth and Luster intersected was *inside* the tree.

Marveling at the size of the thing, he continued his circuit. At what seemed to be about three-quarters of the way around he found two things: signs of a struggle, and a third spot where a piece of wood stuck out at an odd angle. Kneeling, he examined the ground carefully. After a moment he lifted his head and called, "Martha!"

His wife was at his side almost instantly, as were Lightfoot and Rajiv. "What is it?" she asked.

Still kneeling, Ian pointed to various things around them. "There was a fight here. See, there's a blood spot. Here's another . . . and another over there."

“Excellent tracking, sahib,” said Rajiv.

Ian smiled. “Thank you, Rajiv. Now, if you look closely you can see part of a footprint here — and another here. Notice how small they are, the bits of them that you can see? Delver size, I’d say. Would you agree, Lightfoot?”

Lightfoot, who was receiving this information through Martha, whickered his assent.

“But who were they fighting with?” asked Rajiv.

Martha was silent for a moment, then said, “Lightfoot says he suspects it was M'Gama. He also says that this is troubling information.”

Ian nodded, moved forward a bit, then muttered, “Ah! The larger footprints disappear here. And now some of the small ones make more of an impression than would seem likely for their size. I suspect it's because they were carrying off whoever they captured. If so, it’s likely they were taking their captive back to their king.”

“Then this is the trail to follow?” asked Martha.

“It’s our best hope.” Ian studied the ground for a bit longer, then said, “The trail looks to be about two days old.”

“How can you tell that, sahib?”

“By the drying at the edge of some of the footprints. It’s going to make it harder to follow — some of the signs will be lost by now — but I think I can manage it.”

Without another word he started forward, as hot on the trail as a bloodhound with the scent in its nostrils.

# 31

# Unhunting

***Luster: The Wilderness***

Feng Yuan had rarely left the grounds of Beloved's castle after she had been brought there as a child. Even when she had left, it had been as part of a group, with strict supervision. Or, on rare occasion, when Wu Chen had escorted her out on a private mission. So her first day on her own in Luster was also the first time in her life she had experienced real freedom.

She found it both delicious and terrifying.

At first, she had simply run, wanting to get as far as she could from the horrible crime she had helped commit. She expected the Hunters to pursue her. However, she also suspected that their first thoughts would be for the unicorn they had slain, which would give her time to get a fair distance from them.

Despite her terror, and the fact that as a Maiden of the Hunt she was in peak condition, she finally had to stop to catch her breath. That didn't take too long. What proved

far more difficult was gathering her wits. Once she managed that, she called to mind Sun Tzu's precept that all warfare is based on deception.

This wasn't war, really, but the idea was still sound.

So, how to deceive the Hunters? She knew they would soon be after her. Fortunately, she also knew how they worked, and how they would track her. With these things in mind, she began to lay a false trail.

Her first act was to go about five feet into the brush, making sure to leave footprints and break a few twigs as she did. Hiking up her white dress, which was already stained with the blood of the unicorn and torn from her wild flight through the forest, she squatted and emptied her bowels. She cleaned herself with some leaves, hoping they were not the kind that would produce a rash, then returned to her path. She moved forward another hundred feet or so, not being too obvious, but not worrying about any marks she might leave. Then she removed her shoes and began to walk back the way she had come.

She had been careless in her first run and had surely left many signs to track. Now she moved cautiously, trying to avoid leaving any footprint pointing in the wrong direction, trying not to break any branches or twigs that would point opposite to the direction she wanted the Hunters to go.

After slowly and painstakingly traveling some two hundred yards this way, she spotted, to her left, a large

stone within jumping distance. She flung her shoes so that they landed on the far side of the stone, then leaped to it herself, managing to avoid landing on any of the mossy patches that might announce to a watchful eye that someone had passed this way.

She scrambled over the stone, slipped back into her shoes — blessing the fact that they were far more sensible than her white gown — and moved into the forest at a right angle to her previous path.

She had no destination in mind. How could she, knowing nothing of the world she had entered? All she wanted for now was to get away from the Hunters and their mad quest to kill more of the beautiful creatures that . . .

Feng Yuan turned her mind from the memory. She had participated in the death of one unicorn already, and she knew it would haunt her for the rest of her life.

For the remainder of the day, the girl traveled with a caution that was as extreme as had been the carelessness of her first wild flight. Whenever she came to a stream, she would remove her shoes, then leap into it from as far away as she could manage, in order to avoid leaving footprints in the soft soil at the water’s edge. Then she would walk upstream for a hundred feet, where she would drink, if thirsty. These were the only times she would allow herself to urinate. That done, she would step out and leave a

footprint, then step back into the water and walk twice as far in the other direction.

Sometimes she would feel an overwhelming sense of being alone and lost in a world she did not understand, and her gut would tighten as panic threatened to seize her. In those moments she would stop and quiet herself with calming breaths, a technique Wu Chen had taught her.

Other times she found herself wrapped in wonder at the beauty of this world. The streams through which she waded were crystal clear, and sparkled diamond bright when the sun’s rays managed to pierce the blue and silver leaves that formed a canopy above her. Every once in a while she would hear a strange animal cry in the distance and find herself wondering what kind of creatures populated this forest. Occasionally she heard rustlings in the underbrush, and several times spotted brilliantly colored birds flashing among the leaves.

Having been taught self-discipline, she ignored her hunger until twilight. A child from another culture might have starved in the midst of plenty. Feng Yuan, remembering her early years in rural China, simply began to overturn such large stones as she could find. Though the soil held fewer grubs than she had expected, an hour’s searching provided enough to quiet the sharp pangs that had been twisting her belly. She would have preferred to wash them, but she had nothing in which to hold them, and

didn’t want to risk making several trips back to the nearest stream.

Each rock was carefully replaced. If she could still see signs that it had been moved she would collect some of the blue and silver leaves that lay in profusion on the forest floor and use them to hide the evidence of the stone’s having been moved. She continued this way until darkness forced her to cease her hunt for food.

The autumn chill, which she had ignored while traveling, made rest difficult until she decided she would take the risk of gathering enough fallen leaves to make a bed. Thus covered and warmed, she lay down to rest.

It was several hours before she slept.

She woke, stiff and uncomfortable, but glad to be free of the bloody dreams that had tormented her sleep. But no sooner had she stretched and sat up than, to her horror, a unicorn came galloping into the clearing. It reared, pawing the air with its forelegs, and bugled a challenge.

*Here,* thought Feng Yuan, *is my punishment.* Clearly the unicorn had tracked her down and was going to kill her for what she had done.

Well, she could take that. She had it coming.

She spread her arms, inviting the unicorn to pierce her with its horn and end her sorry life.

# 32

# Family Lines

***Luster: The Wilderness***

Ian, Martha, Rajiv, and Lightfoot had stopped to rest for the night. Martha, frustrated by the need to halt their search for even a moment, had cursed the darkness as it fell. She suppressed her restlessness until Rajiv fell asleep, but once the boy was out she prowled the edges of the small clearing they had chosen for their camp. Finally she stopped and stared into the darkness, as if somewhere in its depths she could find a clue to her daughter's whereabouts.

"Martha," said Ian gently, "lie down. You should rest."

"I can't!"

"You'll need your strength for tomorrow. Lightfoot has first watch. Come and lie beside me."

She didn't move. Ian rose and went to her, but when he put his arms around her she pulled away, her body stiff and resisting.

"What is it?" he asked.

“What is it?” she echoed wonderingly. “Ian, have you thought for even a moment about what has happened to us? To *me?”*

“I try not to,” he answered, deep sorrow coloring his voice.

She turned on him. Her own voice low but intense, she said, “Yes, that’s just like you! 'Let’s not think about it, Martha. Let’s pretend it never happened.' But while you were being trained by Beloved, I had plenty of time alone at home to do nothing *but* think.”

“Martha —”

“Don’t!” she said, putting up her hands. “Don’t. I’m not done yet, Ian. I want my daughter, my daughter who was stolen from me by my mother. I want to find her, and I’ll let you help me. But after that I never want to see you again.”

Ian looked at her, stunned.

*“You left me with Beloved!”*

He shook his head. “That’s not true. I left you in order to go train with Beloved, but you agreed to that. And I didn’t *leave* you with her. She came and got you, something I was not aware of until Cara told me Beloved had placed your spirit in the Rainbow Prison.” He sighed. “Martha, neither one of us knew, when this started, what we were being drawn into.” Swallowing his pride, he said, “And I admit I got caught up in the Hunt. But we both believed the things Beloved told us when she came to recruit me.”

Martha drew herself up as if her anger were surging, then seemed to collapse. Pulling back from him, she said, “Ian, there’s still so much I don’t understand. But there is one thing I am clear on, and that is that there’s a great deal you’re not telling me.”

Ian bit his lower lip. He had been waiting, with both eagerness and dread, for the right moment to reveal to his wife all he had learned from Lightfoot. But there had been so little time for quiet talk, and no privacy for the huge thing he needed to tell her.

Martha put her hands on the sides of his face. Her voice softer now, she said, “You’re holding something back, Ian. I can see it in your eyes. What is it?”

And still he hesitated.

Martha clenched her jaw, and it was clear she was trying to control her temper. When she finally spoke, it was only to say, “Just tell me.”

Ian had hoped to give his wife this information gently, to speak when they were linked in love, not locked in anger. He was glad he had been able to keep his own temper, which used to be such a problem, from blazing out, then remembered, with something approaching amusement, that he had learned this control as part of his training to become a Hunter. Glancing around, he spotted a tree from which a thick, low branch grew horizontal to the ground.

“Come,” he said softly, taking Martha’s hand.

She resisted at first, but when she saw where he was leading her, she relented and went with him. He gestured to the silver-barked branch in what he hoped was a gallant move. Martha sat.

As he stood gazing at his wife Ian Hunter felt his heart swell with love. The light of the moon, now two nights past its full, streamed into the clearing, its silver beams tinted blue by the leaves overhead. Perched there, her red hair tumbling over her shoulders, her fine features limned by the pale light, Martha reminded him fiercely, painfully of the young woman he had fallen in love with back when they were both teachers and neither one of them had imagined that unicorns really existed.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked sharply.

“I was thinking of when we met. And I thought to myself, ‘So much has happened since then that it seems like it was on another world.’ Then I realized it really was on another world.”

The hint of a smile twitched at the corner of Martha’s mouth. Perhaps to hide it, she looked away, studying the clearing. Some fifteen feet from them, curled on a pile of leaves, lay the sleeping form of a beggar boy from India. Standing protectively over him was a unicorn — a unicorn who had forged a connection with her so he could speak directly into her mind.

Martha sighed.

“What?” asked Ian.

“It’s just . . . too much. You’ve moved into this slowly, Ian. I . . . I was a prisoner for a long time.” Her voice quavered, and tears welled in her eyes. “I didn’t even really understand that I was a prisoner until you freed me. It’s as if I’ve been asleep for the last four years.”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think those years were completely stolen.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I don’t think you aged during that time. I suspect the spell had you in a kind of suspension.”

She smiled wanly. “Well, that's nice to know. But it doesn’t give the *time* back. It doesn’t give me what happened *during* those years.”

Ian thought about reminding her that they were bad years, but thought better of it.

“I knew when Beloved spirited me off to her castle four years ago that my world was spinning out of control.”

“She came to get you herself?” asked Ian in surprise.

“No. It was that man, Kenneth.”

Ian’s face darkened.

“He told me Beloved wanted me to come and join you at the castle.”

She turned away, obviously pained by the memory.

He took her shoulders. “You realize I had no idea this was happening, don’t you?” He tightened his grip. “You must

believe me, Martha. *I did not know.”*

The tears that had been gathering in Martha’s eyes spilled over and began to roll down her cheeks. “Didn’t you even wonder about me?” she asked bitterly.

He shook his head, puzzled. “What about the letters?”

“Letters?”

“Whenever I returned from a mission, I would write you a letter. And Beloved would give me letters that she told me came from you.”

Martha shuddered. “She’s a monster, Ian. She’ll do anything, say anything, to get what she wants. She lied to us about everything.”

“I don’t think all of it was lying,” said Ian. “She truly believes that the unicorns are dangerous.”

“All right, she’s not a liar, she’s insane! It’s been just as bad for us either way.” She paused, then said, “The thing is, after she took me there’s just this big . . . blank. I didn’t even know I was ‘sleeping’ or whatever you want to call it. And then I awoke to find that four years had gone by. Do you wonder that I’m upset?”

Ian groaned. “No. No I cannot wonder. I just had no idea. That woman is worse than I even imagined.” He took a deep breath.

“What is it?” asked Martha. “There's more, I know there is, I can tell by the way you're acting. Please, just tell me.”

When he remained silent she smacked her hand against his chest and cried, *“Just tell me!”*

And with that invitation, in the moonlight of an enchanted world, Ian Hunter began to unfold for his wife what he had learned of the strange tale of her own family.

“It starts with your mother,” he said.

Martha’s face hardened, but she nodded and said, “Go on.”

“The reason she kidnapped Cara was to protect her.”

“From what?” spat Martha.

“The Hunters.”

“Why in the world would my mother have to protect Cara from the Hunters?”

And here they were, at the moment he had been dreading. Swallowing hard, he gathered his courage and said, “Your mother was born a unicorn princess.”

# 33

# From Storm to Story

***Luster: Dark Mountain***

Graumag surged upward, gaining speed.

“Yike!” cried the Squijum, tightening his grip on Cara’s neck.

Cara herself flinched with each blinding flash of lightning that strobed around them. She knew the jolting shards of electricity were perilously close, for thunder followed every flash almost instantly, the shock waves pounding against her.

The storm did not seem to bother Graumag, who flapped her way upward through the cold winds that shrieked around them without comment. Cara did not feel so calm and wrapped her arms tightly over the dragon’s smooth claws, terrified that each new gust might sweep her into the darkness.

The world below — jagged rock faces slashed with deep valleys — appeared in brief fragments as the pitch black of

the night surrendered every few moments to a new flash of vivid light.

Finally Cara could stand it no longer. “Graumag!” she screamed. “We have to get down or the lightning will strike us!”

Twisting her long neck so that her head was close to Cara’s, the dragon replied, “Do not fear! We’re shielded by magic.”

Cara waited for the heat of the dragon’s breath to pass before trying to answer. But by then Graumag had straightened her neck and obviously considered the topic closed.

They flew on, coming at last to an opening near the mountain’s peak, which was revealed to Cara by another lightning flash. Graumag hovered in front of the cave, then opened her claws and let Cara drop. The girl did not have time to scream; the fall turned out to be less than two feet. She landed with a thump on the ledge that fronted the cave.

“Out of the way!” roared Graumag.

Cara crawled to the side of the ledge, the Squijum squawking and bounding along beside her. An instant later the dragon settled onto the rocky outthrust, then slithered into her cave. Turning about like a dog making its bed, she whispered, “You may enter my home, small one.”

“Big lizard big bad,” muttered the Squijum.

“Hush,” whispered Cara. Fumbling in her pocket, she found her sphere, took it out, and twisted it until it was the size of a tangerine — providing just enough light for her to get her footing. Then she stood and walked into the cave, trying to look dignified. It was dry, warmer than she had expected, and smelled slightly of sulfur.

“An interesting device,” commented Graumag, gesturing toward the sphere with a single, outstretched claw.

“My friend the gryphon gave it to me. If you don’t mind, I’d like to make it glow a little more brightly. That way I can see you while we talk.”

“I have no objection.”

Cara twisted the sphere until it filled both her hands. As its gentle light grew stronger, she could see that Graumag was not as big as Firethroat. *Which doesn’t mean she’s not big enough to swallow me in a single bite,* she thought uneasily. *Two at the most.*

The bauble’s light was steady. Even so, the dragon’s scales seemed to shift in color, appearing now green, now bronze, then green again. She was long and sinuous, her body more snakelike than either Firethroat’s or Ebillan’s. A spiny crest ran along her neck from a spot just between her eyes — which gleamed with intelligence — to about five feet above the place where her wings erupted from her shoulders. Her front legs were long, and unexpectedly

muscular. A series of long fleshy strands, twice the thickness of a man's thumb, hung from her neck.

Cara decided her hostess was both horrifying and elegantly beautiful.

The dragon gazed at Cara for several moments before saying, "I have been interested in meeting you since I first heard rumors of your exploits."

"Oh, well, rumors," said Cara, trying to sound casual. "Probably not very accurate."

"Precisely. Which is why I would rather hear the story from your own lips."

"I have come to seek your help," said Cara.

Scarlet flames danced around the edges of Graumag's nostrils, each of which was at least a foot wide. "You seek my help, but offer nothing in return?" she asked in tones of acid. "Not even a story?"

Realizing her error, Cara quickly bowed her head and said, "Forgive me, Mighty Graumag. I forget myself. Of course I ought to offer you something, and a story is a small price to ask."

The dragon raised a cautioning claw. "The story is not the price of my help, small one. *That* will be given freely, should I decide to give it at all. The story is my price for *listening* to your request. So I hope you can make it interesting. Otherwise, who knows what might happen?"

“I understand,” said Cara. She closed her eyes to gather her thoughts, then began to speak.

# 34

# Amalia Decides

***Luster: Autumngrove***

At that same moment Amalia Flickerfoot, Martha's mother and Cara's grandmother, stood alone in her clearing, brooding on the danger that had come to Luster. She kept coming back to Cara’s words about using what she had learned as a human to help in their defense.

Her thoughts were interrupted when a husky voice said, “May I enter, O Queen?”

“You are always welcome here, Madame Leonetti.”

The old woman stepped through the spiral opening in the hedge that bordered the Queen’s private space. She was dressed simply, in a tunic the color of wheat, sturdy brown pants, and high leather boots. Her long hair, silver as a unicorn’s mane, was bound into a braid and coiled atop her head. Coming to Amalia, she laid a hand on her shoulder and asked, mind-to-mind, “How are you holding up?”

“Not well,” admitted the Queen with a heavy sigh. “Madame Leonetti, I will say to you what I would say to no

one else: I am deeply troubled. I have had too little time to adjust to discovering who I really am — no time at all, really, given that the threat of Beloved's invasion has been hanging over me from the moment I recovered my true shape. And now we have not only Beloved to worry about, but also the matter of these shivers and tremblings in the ground, which surely must be related to what she has done. In addition, I am concerned about M'Gama. Her long silence makes me fear for her."

"Difficult times indeed," said Madame Leonetti.

"Cara said something interesting when she came to bid me farewell," continued the Queen, almost as if speaking to herself.

The old woman raised a questioning eyebrow.

"She said that perhaps my human experience could be useful in the struggle to come. Though unicorns are not used to deception and subterfuge, those are helpful things in time of war. And they are things that I learned, sometimes too well, in my human life."

"Nor are your people used to thinking in terms of battles and armies," replied Madame Leonetti.

"This is not a battle," replied the Queen wearily. "It is a Hunt."

"Must that be so?"

The Queen lifted her head.

“Beloved came for a Hunt,” continued Alma Leonetti. “Why not give her a war instead? Even if unicorns don’t think that way, you can, My Queen.”

The idea made Amalia nod in grim satisfaction. Pursuit by Beloved’s Hunters was what had driven her to the desperate act of becoming a human. Would it not be a delicious bit of irony if the things she had learned in that form could now help her defeat those same enemies? She sighed, then said, “I wish I had paid more attention to the history lessons I was subjected to in my younger human years. More knowledge of the tactics and strategies used in great battles would be useful at this moment.”

“Does that mean you’re going to wait and let them hunt you down?”

Amalia snorted, a distinctly unqueenlike sound. “You have a rather sharp way of making your points, Madame Leonetti.”

“Persuading Queens is my specialty. It was what first brought me to Luster.”

Shaking her head, Amalia turned and called to a unicorn standing just outside the clearing. “Laughing Stream! Please gather the council. I wish to speak to them.”

Laughing Stream, usually solemn these days despite her name, whickered a reply, then trotted off to spread the word.

“Will you accompany me?” asked the Queen.

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything!”

Together, they traveled the short distance to the Council Grove. Before long they had been joined by eleven other unicorns, all the council save Lightfoot, who was still missing.

“Why have you called us together, Amalia?” asked Moonheart, when the last of the group had arrived. “Is there news?”

“No news, brother, at least none from the outside. But I have been thinking, and I wish to hear what my council has to say about what is on my mind.”

“What are your thoughts?” asked Fire-Eye.

The Queen took her time before answering. Finally she said, “Beloved has come to Luster to hunt us and to kill us, and she expects us to act like the beasts she believes us to be. I say let us defy that expectation.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cloudmane.

As Amalia replied her voice rose, growing prouder and more firm with each sentence. “I mean this: Let us not wait for Beloved to hunt us. Let us instead take the fight to her. Let us plan for a great battle, on the field of our choosing. We may die if we do. But better to die on our own terms, bold and proud, than as victims of the Hunt. Shall we go quietly to our deaths? Shall we become victims who do not fight back? Or shall we rise and fight? I say we fight! I say we are not beasts to be hunted and herded! I say we are

creatures of light, and fire, and strength. And I say we shall not quietly go to our graves! Who is with me?”

A moment of silence descended upon the clearing. Then Moonheart threw back his head and bugled a cry of defiance. An instant later Fire-Eye joined him, then Cloudmane. Soon the entire council had reared, their silvery hooves pawing the air in sign of their readiness to fight, to defy the terror of Beloved.

Amalia felt a shiver of pride, of power, and of apprehension. They were with her. They were ready to fight.

But how?

*I cannot do this on my own,* she thought desperately. *But who is there to help me? Who is there in Luster who understands the ways of war and can help me channel my gifts for deception into a strategy for battle?*

The answer, when it finally came, would arrive from a most unexpected source. And it would present the Queen with the greatest challenge of her life.

# The Legend Continues

What followed as the Hunters continued to spread through Luster and the unicorns mounted their resistance is another story altogether . . . as is the story of what happened when Cara met Elihu and had to make the most fateful decision yet. These, and many other things, are revealed in *The Wounded Tree*, the sixth volume of the Unicorn Chronicles.